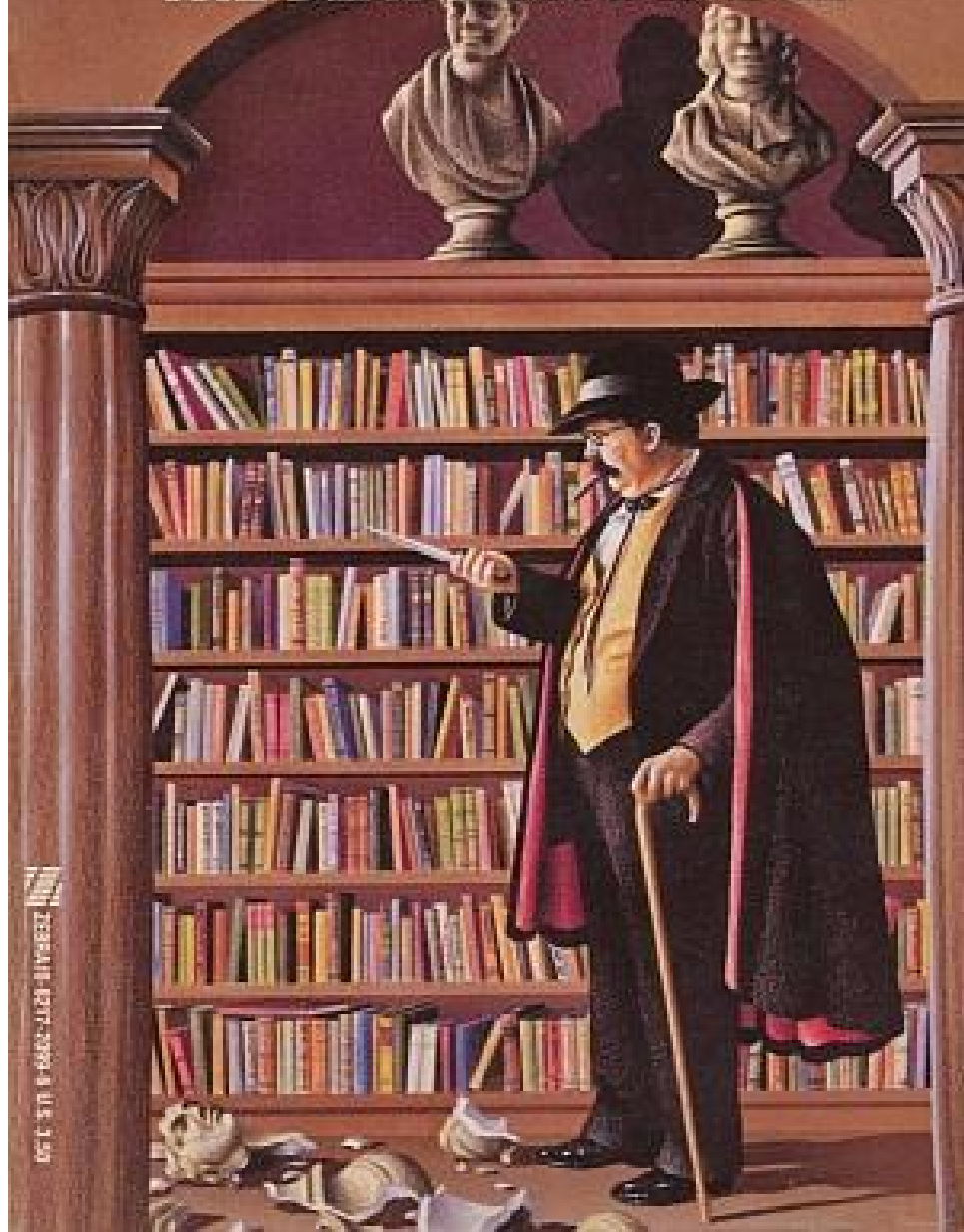


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JOHN DICKSON CARR

THE DEAD MAN'S KNOCK



ISBN 0-312-077-099-9 U.S. \$1.50

DEAD MAN'S KNOCK

JOHN DICKSON CARR, 1958

PART ONE

WAYWARD WOMAN

'Quit, quit, for shame; this will not move, This cannot take her;

If of herself she will not love, Nothing can make her:

The devil take her!'

- Sir John Suckling, Aglaura.

BRENDA closed the door of the bedroom behind her. She let the knob turn softly, so that the latch shouldn't click, and stood listening in the upstairs hall.

Her first impulse, which was to walk on tiptoe, she stifled angrily. She would have to pass the door of Mark's study; he would hear her. And, anyway (the anger grew) this was ridiculous. She was simply going out.

If Mark asked her anything, she would say she was going to meet Caroline.

Lie number one.

Dim light in the upstairs hall shone on a hardwood floor, on cream - and - grey wallpaper, on the white - painted doors with their glass knobs. The window at the front of the hall was pushed wide open, its screen locked into place.

Here in the Virginia countryside, on the right bank of the river, you hardly realized you were less than ten miles from Washington. Washington, to Brenda, meant Frank Chadwick and nothing but Frank Chadwick.

The door of Mark's study, closed, was at the back of the hall near the top of the stairs. The floor often creaked and cracked when you passed that door.

Still Brenda waited, feeling the pressure of silence. The July night, heavy with heat and yet soft and disturbing, breathed in around her.

There was a throb of crickets, slow and drowsy at their wiry hum. But Brenda heard only the beating of her own heart.

Through her anger went a twinge of what she knew to be guilt; and this, of course, increased the anger still more. It was absurd! And she hadn't done anything much to be ashamed of! At least . . . well, not yet.

She snatched open her handbag, took out a compact, and tilted the mirror in the faint light. Brenda was thirty - two years old, and looked younger. The reflection of her eyes, which were an intense and luminous grey, set wide apart, seemed to jump back at her and betray every secret.

She shut the compact and restored it to her bag. After waiting thirty seconds, taut, counting them, she went to her husband's study and tapped at the door.

'Yes?' said the familiar voice, muffled.

Brenda opened the door.

Mark, in an old sports - coat, sat behind a flat and littered desk between the two windows at the back of the study, facing her. He was looking up at her steadily, courteous but otherwise without expression.

The light of a lamp in a green glass shade, hanging over the desk, touched his thick dark hair. Though Mark would only be forty on his next birthday, there was a heavy vertical furrow down each cheek.

'Mark,' she said, 'I'm going out.'

Mark merely nodded. He continued to look up at her without emotion, without expression, his hands flat on an open book on the desk.

'I'm going to see Caroline,' Brenda went on, her voice growing louder. 'Are you working?'

'No. I was reading a detective story.'

'Oh. Is it - is it good?'

'I don't know. It's reasonably well - written. But I can't tell whether it's good until I've finished it.'

'Oh. Well, I'm going to Caroline's. I won't be more than an hour or two. Don't worry about me.'

Mark's own voice, heavy and slow - speaking, was growing louder too. 'Indeed?' he said. 'My dear, why on earth should I worry about you?'

Brenda moistened her lips.

She was conscious, with heightened sensitivity, of all familiar things. The scent of carpets and polished wood and old books. The open windows, with the pulse of crickets outside. The grounds of Queen's College, which had been named for Queen Anne of England nearly two hundred and fifty years ago. Above all, Frank Chadwick's car waiting for her in the dark.

'My dear, why on earth should I worry about you?'

'You shouldn't! I mean, it's only the sort of thing people say: "Don't worry about me." That's all.'

'I see. Forgive me.'

'Mark, do you know how infuriating you can be at times?'

'Yes. I suppose all of us can be infuriating at times.'

'But you don't know. You just don't notice people or things. You can't be bothered.'

The sound they heard then made both of them start slightly, though neither observed it in the other.

It was not a loud or sharp noise. It rose on a single faint note. It was as though someone, very quickly, had brushed the button of a motor - car horn in brief and furtive summons.

Brenda's flesh went hot and cold. She couldn't go at once, in case Mark had noticed. Though it was plain, she thought, that he hadn't noticed.

Mark's powerful hands lay idly on the book. But he lowered his eyes. The overhead light, with aching clarity, brought out wrinkles across his forehead as well as the furrows down his cheeks. He could be kindly, satiric, imaginative, and utterly forgetful: all at once, Brenda thought, and all mixed up.

What Mark Ruthven saw before him, in turn, was a woman outwardly almost as composed as he. And yet, against a room where two thousand sombre books were jammed in ceiling - high shelves, Brenda's beauty had a flush, a brightness, an uncertainty.

Her hair, with a rich brown sheen, fell to her shoulders. She was not tall. The forehead was broad, the eyes wide - spaced above a short nose, which gave the illusion of high cheek - bones. Her broad mouth, like her eyes, held a humour and generosity now obscured by some other feeling.

Wearing a thin dress of white silk, tight scarlet belt, no stockings, and scarlet shoes, she stood in the open doorway with one hand on the knob and the other clasping a dull - red handbag.

Mark Ruthven glanced down at the novel in front of him, and turned over a page. Both he and his wife began to speak at once.

'Mark, I - -'

'Brenda, my dear - -'

'Yes?' inquired Brenda, tossing her head as though to shake back the hair.

'If you're going as far as Caroline Kent's, would you mind going a little farther and leaving a book at Miss Lestrangle's?'

Brenda's grey eyes, with the black pupils and strongly luminous whites, had slid round as though she were listening. They moved back suddenly.

'Rose Lestrangle?' she said. 'Really? That awful woman?'

Her husband's eyebrows went up. 'Not a very good choice of words, is it?'

'Oh, words! I didn't even know you'd met her.'

'Yes. I know her. As for the current gossip - -'

'Oh, I'm not concerned about her morals, thanks,' Brenda laughed. 'What's all this about a book?'

A shade of exasperation crossed Mark's face. His fingers trembled slightly.

'I met Miss Lestrangle in College Avenue this morning. She wants to borrow a copy of Armadale.'

'Oh? Couldn't you take her the book yourself?'

'Of course. I can do it tomorrow. I'm sorry to have troubled you.'

Something flashed across the room between these two. Brenda, about to turn away, swung back again.

'Mark, listen. It's a lot to ask, I know. But there's something dreadful going on hereabouts, and it concerns that Lestrangle woman. Would it matter very much if we didn't have anything to do with her, even calling on her or lending her books?'

Mark Ruthven, Professor of English Literature at Queen's College, raised his head.

'Have you made up your mind, Brenda, what it is you do want? In anything?'

It was as though he had struck her across the face.

Colour came up under her eyes, those dark - fringed eyes with the grey iris and black pupils; then it receded, making the eyes seem enormous. The thin bodice of her dress rose and fell with quick breathing.

'You just don't care, do you?'

'Care, my dear?' Mark asked politely.

'Up to a minute ago,' said Brenda, 'I hadn't made up my mind, no. But now I have. And I may as well tell you. I'm not going to Caroline Kent's at all. I'm going out with Frank Chadwick, to his apartment in Washington.'

'How you surprise me,' said Mark, and smiled.

It was rather a terrifying smile, but she did not notice this. If the first courteous slap had been hard, this one enraged her more. For perhaps twenty seconds she was silent, fighting her breath and gripping the knob of the door.

'You knew'

'Yes.'

'Then all I can say is,' cried Brenda, 'I don't think much of you for it.'

Up went her husband's eyebrows again.

'Do you complain of my ethical standards, my dear? Wasn't it playing the game that I should know it and not tell you?'

There was no dealing with him in this mood. He was like a swordsman who stung you, and you couldn't sting back.

'Frank's been in love with me for months. We - we haven't done anything about it yet, if you know what I mean. But Frank wants me to divorce you and marry him.'

'In other days, my dear, he would have been called a man of honour.'

'You haven't any right to hold me against my will,' Brenda cried. 'I did love you. Terribly. But that's all gone, and we can't put the clock back. Have you any right to hold me?'

Mark rose to his feet: a little over middle height, broad and wiry in the old sports coat. He seemed to be considering.

'When people have to talk about rights in a marriage, Brenda, there's something very much wrong with it.'

'Yes. I don't doubt that. There is.'

'You see, we've been married for five years. That's always a danger - point. You think you're bored to insanity with the small round of academic life; and you know you're bored with me. Has it ever occurred to you, my dear,' he added politely, 'that I might feel much the same way?'

'About what?'

'About you,' said Mark.

During a silence while you might have counted ten, Brenda stared back at him.

'Knowing what you know of me, Brenda, do you really find it so very strange?'

'I - -'

'Do you?'

Brenda took a step forward, and hesitated. Her physical presence had never been so desirable or disturbing, if he had been in any mood to be disturbed by it. Then she controlled her voice.

'By the way. Mark, who is it? Who's the woman?'

'That hardly matters, does it?'

'No, of course it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all. Still! If some trollop has been making eyes at you, as some of them have wanted to do,' Brenda spoke with dignity, 'it's only fair to let me know about it. After all, I have a right - -'

'Come, my dear! Not another right?'

Brenda opened her mouth, and stopped. Faintly, in the distance, the note of the motor - horn rose again. It called through the night. Its summons was insistent and a little impatient.

For a moment more Brenda stood looking at him, moistening her lips with the tip of her tongue. Her face was pale, though with a touch of colour under the eyes.

She ran out of the study, throwing the door shut. He heard her quick, light footsteps rap across hardwood, move softly down carpeted stairs, and across hardwood again. The front door opened and slammed.

Its vibrations trembled away in the little house. Twenty seconds later, someone trod on the starter of a car in College Avenue. The hum of the motor rose, whispered into gear, and presently throbbed away to silence.

Mark Ruthven, in his slow - moving way, came out from behind the desk. He glanced at his wrist - watch, and then out of the window at the back.

Behind the house, three hundred yards away where dense foliage loomed for acres against a lighter sky, fireflies were winking under the trees. Even at the height of the summer Queen's College could not be called deserted. A few dim lights showed amid the elms and sycamores. But it was a small place, with a student - body of less than five hundred; near - emptiness made it seem dead.

The decrepit old clock at Founder's Hall began to strike ten. Again Mark glanced at his watch. He looked slowly round the ceiling - high walls of books, and at the big filing - cabinet containing all the unpublished material for his life of Wilkie Collins.

Then he went downstairs, to the telephone at the back of the lower hall, and dialled the number of Rose Lestrangle's cottage in Harley Lane.

The ringing - tone had not buzzed twice before Rose answered.

'Yes?' said her husky voice, caressing even the monosyllable.

Mark hesitated. He had a sudden vision of her, as clearly as though she were here in the hall and could touch him. He saw the glossy black hair, as soft and heavy as fleece. He saw the provocative pout, the slow and curling smile.

Rose Lestrangle had no business here. She troubled the waters and stirred men's minds as she loved to do. She was at once sly and reckless, with an exhibitionism verging on lunacy. Undoubtedly she had caused that scandal at a closed infirmary more than a month ago: only muttered of, whispered behind hands, yet as true as it was grotesque and incongruous at Queen's College.

And yet - and yet - -!

'Yes?' whispered Rose's insistent voice on the phone. 'Is that you, darling? I've been waiting.'

And, at the same moment, the front doorbell trilled a peal of warning through the hall.

'Yes?' Rose's voice said for the third time, in a different and sharper tone. 'Yes? Who's speaking, please?'

Again the doorbell pealed a warning. Mark stood motionless, the phone at his ear, looking over his shoulder. Lights were burning in the hall, as well as in the living - room on his left and the dining - room on his right. He could not ignore visitors.

The phone clicked as he softly replaced it, cutting off Rose's voice as it cut off the allure of her personality. Mark Ruthven settled the sports coat on his shoulders, adjusted his de, and went to open the door.

'GOOD evening, Caroline,' he said.

Caroline Kent, one step below him on the crazy - paved path, regarded him with a face of apprehension.

Caroline was a 'sensible' girl who, her fiance once or twice complained, took every remark so literally that you wanted to yell. It was not lack of intelligence; she had a reason. As the daughter of Dr. Samuel Kent, head of the history department, for years she had been compelled to take care of an impractical father and an even more impractical mother.

In her late twenties, tall and well - shaped, Caroline was very attractive without being in the least pretty. Her brown eyes were straightforward, her fair hair naturally curly. If sometimes she appeared stolid in contrast to her mercurial fiance, Caroline loved being dominated and obeyed Toby Saunders's every whim.

Belatedly Mark switched on the overhead lamp outside.

'Caroline!' he said. 'What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing! Nothing at all! Only - -'

The grass of the front lawn, pale under light, stretched out to a low hedge where College Avenue curved up under its arch of great trees. Toby Saunders's new Chevrolet, in that year 1948, was parked outside. Toby himself, as Caroline instinctively glanced over her shoulder towards him, fiddled with one of the doors.

'You don't need to lock it, Toby,' called Mark, who never locked his own Chevrolet. His voice was louder than he intended. 'Caroline! What's the matter? Come in.'

'I don't know whether we ought to come in, really,' said Caroline. 'We didn't want to disturb you when you're working so hard on the biography. But it is rather important, and my father asked Toby to see you.'

'Your father did?'

'Yes. Where's Brenda?'

'Brenda's out, I'm afraid.'

'Well, that's better, actually. I - I don't mean it's better, of course,'

Caroline added in haste. 'Only that it was you we wanted to see.'

Toby Saunders, in a fawn - coloured suit with the tie flapping out over the coat, hurried up the path towards them. Toby, about Mark's age, was a historian employed at the Pentagon among those who were preparing a history of World War Two before others had finished their history of World War One. Toby's head was lowered; Mark could see only his close - cut brown hair, and not the look on the thin, sharp, sensitive face.

'Are you sure we're not disturbing you. Mark?' Caroline persisted.

'I haven't done a thing all evening. Come in, both of you.'

Mark closed the front door and led them into the living - room. He could hear Toby breathing.

In the living - room, where Brenda's taste showed in white - covered easy chairs and pale - green walls and dark fitted carpet, the Venetian blinds had been lowered. Caroline, after hesitating, sat down on the sofa in the front window - bay. Mark watched her companion.

Toby, though thin and not very tall, had an intense nervous vitality which crackled round him. His eyes, of a narrowed and probing blue, roved round the room before they fixed on Mark.

'It's been kept hush - hush,' he said abruptly, 'because nobody knows what it means. For just over a week there's been all hell to pay at the college.'

'Oh? How?'

'At a time when there aren't any undergraduates here,' said Toby, 'somebody in our midst has been playing undergraduate jokes. Only - they weren't jokes. They seem, I say they seem, to have been full - dress attempts at murder.'

Caroline opened her mouth to protest. Her arms were straight down at her sides, her hands pressed flat on the sofa. The glow of a parchment - shaded lamp illumined her strained - looking brown eyes and the short, curly fair hair.

'Murder?' Mark exclaimed. And then: 'Are the police in on this?'

'Police? Here? For Pete's sake, man, use some sense! Queen's College would sooner welcome the bubonic plague or the Black Death.'

'Then what happened, Toby? Sit down. Tell me.'

Toby complied, sinking down on the sofa beside Caroline. You could still hear him breathe. On the low coffee - table in front of them there was a silver box of cigarettes. Mark opened the box, pushing it towards them.

Caroline shook her head, quickly and impatiently. Toby did not even notice.

'In the year of grace 1710 - - ' he began.

'Do you need to start as far back as that?'

Toby lifted a face of nervous bravado.

'Shut up,' he said, suddenly coming off his high - flown oratory and just as suddenly resuming it. ' In the year of grace 1710, when the state of Virginia was Her Majesty's colony of Virginia, one Septimus Hewitt founded an academy for boys. He founded it well outside Belhaven, now known as Alexandria. The settlement wasn't large; nobody thought Septimus' Hewitt's school would prosper. But the planters sent their sons and it did prosper.

'Within twenty years it ceased to be a boys' school. Queen's College was educating, or at least housing, young gentlemen of Virginia. Septimus Hewitt died. In the middle of what is never called the campus, but always The Lawn, they put up a statue of him: flowing periwig, full - skirted coat and all. Remember that statue. It's important.'

Toby broke off, quelling the sarcasm in his voice.

'If I tell you the story. Mark, as though you didn't know a damn thing about the place where you teach, will you accept the fact that I've got a good reason?'

'Of course.'

'But maybe I oughtn't to tell it. I'm an outsider in more senses than one. Maybe Caroline - -?'

Caroline reached out and touched his hand.

'No,' she said. 'You, Toby. Always you.'

For so stolid - seeming a person, Caroline could be almost as intense

as Toby. Toby glanced at her. He looked embarrassed as Caroline herself was covered with embarrassment, and he flew off again.

'A direct descendant of the original Septimus Hewitt is the Master of Queen's now. (Never the President, please; say the Master.) But let's forget the past, in so far as we can. Let's consider a character known as George.' He turned to Caroline. 'You know George?'

'Toby! I haven't lived here all my life without knowing - -!'

Toby smote his forehead.

'If you don't stop being so literal - minded, angel - face - -!'

Even in the midst of her worry Caroline gave Mark a quick little smile which said, 'You mustn't mind him; he doesn't mean it'. And Toby, as usual, was rent with momentary contrition. The love between this repressed pair, Toby being a good deal of a Puritan for all his talk, was so strong and sincere that Mark Ruthven felt a stab and almost turned away.

'The character known as George,' pursued Toby, 'is an institution. He's over seventy. During the summer vacation, every night just before dark, he goes through the various buildings to make sure everything's in order before he locks up for the night. '

'He goes through the buildings, that is, except the Library, the Science Hall, and the infirmary. The Library and the Science Hall, facing The Lawn, are open much later than that. The infirmary, quite a little distance away, is closed during the summer. But forget the infirmary; I only thought of it in connection with something else.'

Toby hesitated, scowling.

'Anyway! The first of the "incidents", as we'll call them, occurred on Friday evening, the 9th of July. George had nearly finished his round. The last building he inspected was the gymnasium.

'Inside the gym it was all quiet. Nobody uses it after dark because the electricity's cut off in summer. There was just enough afterglow, through the skylight, so that George could see outlines. The floor was as bare as a barn. Mats, parallel - bars, vaulting - horse were all pushed back under the gallery that runs round the gym. But on the west wall, daubed in luminous paint, was a rough drawing of Septimus Hewitt's statue.'

Whatever Mark expected, it was not this. 'A drawing of ... what?'

'Of the Founder's statue,' retorted Toby, seeming to pounce without even getting up. 'Remember now! There were no scrawled messages, nothing of that sort. Only an outline of the statue with a few details, about three feet high, glowing in luminous paint from a thin brush.'

'Well, it gave the old boy one hell of a shock. Tonight Caroline's father kept asking him why. At first George didn't seem to know why. He hemmed and hawed; finally the real reason came out. It was getting dark, he said; and the place felt funny; and then, in a corner of the gym, somebody laughed.'

Caroline turned her head away. Toby did not move. Mark shook off the imaginings that were crowding closer.

'What did George do?'

'Oh, he's conscientious. He scrubbed out the drawing, as well as he could, with a waste - rag. Next morning he reported it to the Administration Office. They thought he'd been drunk or dreaming. Maybe George thought so too.'

'Why?'

'Because, when he went back on Saturday evening, there were no traces left of the luminous paint. The gym, the swimming - pool in the basement: nobody anywhere. On Sunday evenings every building is closed. George had time off. He was feeling better on the Monday night, July 12th: that is, until he entered the gym.'

'The picture of the Founder's statue had come back again, as glowing as ever. It was towards the south wall, under the overhang of the gallery, and it was daubed on the floor.'

'George lost his head. His only idea was to scrub it out again, scrub it out at any cost. He ran over and knelt down in the blaze of paint.'

'Someone was waiting in the gallery, eighteen feet over George's head. Someone leaned over the gallery - rail, holding a heavy iron weight cut from one pulley of an exercise - apparatus in the gym. The weight dropped like a plummet and cracked the floor eighteen inches in front of George's skull.'

Toby paused.

Quietly now, without taking his eyes from Mark, he reached out and pressed Caroline's hand.

'No,' Toby said, 'he didn't see or hear anybody. First it was the crash of noise; then the sight of what missed him. He collapsed, and just managed to get out of the gym. On Tuesday morning the picture of the Founder's statue was still there, with the iron weight lying beside it.

'George didn't go back there. At home he blurted out the story. His wife put him to bed and called the doctor. On Tuesday night, to keep the whole thing in the family, George's grandson took on the job.

'Young Hubert, his grandson, is sixteen and a smart lad. Hubert did more than search the gym. He hung around in the afternoons, or whenever he could, to keep watch. And I can bring you up to date with the last act.

'Let's see: yes! This is Saturday. Late this afternoon, in broad daylight, Hubert was circling the gym on the outside, close to it. From Tuesday to Saturday, night or day, he'd seen or heard nothing. But he heard a sound just then, from inside the building, and he guessed what it was.

'Hubert ducked around the north side, and into the gym. He ran downstairs; to the swimming - pool in the basement. He'd been right about the noise. The swimming - pool, which is supposed to be kept empty, was now full.

'It had just filled; the water was rippling. A fellow named Billy Cole, the head ground - keeper, says you can easily turn it on if you know where to look. That basement, what with ground - level windows and trees outside, is dim enough at any time. They've got ten feet of water at the deep end; and the deep end, with the diving - board, is nearest the door.

'Hubert charged in. He saw water move, and white reflections move with it. He ran to the deep end and looked over the edge. That was when somebody, unseen, gave him a violent shove in the back. And Hubert can't swim.'

Again Toby paused.

Toby's expression, full of hatred for what he had to tell, was nevertheless precise and even prim in its lip - movements. The open cigarette - box, a silver desk - lighter, a silver ash - tray gleamed with

hypnotic effect on the coffee - table.

'Mark,' he added abruptly, 'I've never seen you look so sick.'

'I don't think I've ever felt so sick. Are you telling me the boy died there? Alone? Trapped? With nobody to help?'

'No!' snapped Toby, and then controlled himself. 'By accident, or maybe the grace of God, that same Billy Cole - the head ground - keeper - happened to be passing on Ghost Walk. He heard the screaming and the thrashing in water. Billy kicked the glass out of a window and crawled through. Hubert had gone down when Billy dived after him. Hubert's life was saved by artificial respiration on the spot. But it was just saved. Only just.'

'This afternoon, you said? He's all right now?'

'As right as anybody can be, after near - drowning and a shock like that. Yes.'

'I think I've met the Johnson boy: Hubert, I mean. He won a scholarship to Queen's at sixteen. I never knew he couldn't swim.'

'Nobody knew it,' said Toby. 'Everybody can swim, eh? That's our good American motto. Hubert was ashamed because he couldn't swim; he never told anyone. But we've got quite a happy joker playing tricks at the gym, haven't we?'

'For heaven's sake, Toby,' cried Caroline, 'must you harp on it so much?'

'Yes! I must! That's the whole point.' He turned back to Mark. 'This story has been whispered all over Queenshaven since George collapsed. Now it's more than whispered; it's got to be dealt with. The Dean and the Master are both vacationing. In any up - to - date place they'd have had assistants to handle this. But here? Oh, no! Caroline's father has been deputized to look into it.'

Here Toby rapped his knuckles on the coffee - table.

'Mind you,' he said, 'Dr. Kent's a first - class man. He's a historian. But he has one opinion about this business, and I have another opinion. So we've agreed to let you be the judge.'

'I'm flattered,' Mark told him with deep sincerity. 'And of course I'm at your service if you think I can help.'

'Oh, you can help. Don't worry about that. Just listen while I state the case as it seems to be.'

'Well?'

'At first glance,' argued Toby, 'some respectable person at the college or at Queenshaven is a murderous lunatic who tried to kill two people and nearly succeeded. Right?'

'At first glance, yes.'

'Good! In that case, the drawing of the Founder's statue has no meaning. It was only used as a decoy. The maniac first drew it on the west wall and uttered a ghost - laugh to scare George. George tried to scrub it out, as the maniac figured he'd do. So everything was set. The maniac let George worry for two days. Then he daubed the picture on the floor, under the gallery. When George rushed over there, George's head would be as plain as a target against that luminous paint.

'The same thing applies to Hubert: another murder - trap. The maniac filled the swimming - pool, intending to use it tonight. There'd have been another luminous daub somewhere in the basement room, to lure Hubert to the edge of deep water. But Hubert heard the pool being filled this afternoon; the maniac got an unexpected opportunity; and Hubert was pushed in to drown. However it happened, it was only a variation of the plan to kill him. Is that a fair statement of the case?'

'Yes,' admitted Mark, drawing a deep breath. ' I think it's a fair statement.'

Toby Saunders rose to his feet.

'Right! ' he said, and nodded. 'Then I've got to tell you, here and now: I don't believe a word of it. I don't think the joker ever intended to kill anybody.'

Caroline had raised her head. Mouth open, body rigid, she stared, at him wide - eyed.

'Toby! Are you serious? Father says - -!'

'I know he does. But you haven't heard what I say, and this is it.'

Again Toby, on his feet, was looking fixedly at Mark.

'If the joker meant to kill a harmless old man like George, why didn't

he do it? With a heavy iron weight and a plain target, he couldn't miss. And yet he did miss,' Toby spread his hands wide, 'by nearly a foot and a half.

'The same goes for Hubert. I agree the joker grabbed an unexpected chance and pushed Hubert over the edge. But to kill him? No! And I've given you the clues. Who knew Hubert couldn't swim? His parents, maybe his grandparents; nobody else. We just assume, all of us, that any healthy sixteen - year - old can swim like a fish. True or false?'

'True, I suppose,' Mark said.

'The joker may be a maniac; I think he is. He may have wanted to scare hell out of George and Hubert; I think he did. And that's all.'

Caroline had also sprung to her feet.

'If that's so, Toby, aren't you imagining somebody almost as bad as a crazy murderer?'

'Maybe I am.'

'And, if he didn't want to kill or even hurt them, what in heaven's name did he want to do?'

'That's just it,' Toby answered blankly. 'I don't know.'

'Toby, it's ridiculous!'

'Yes, I admit it is. All the same, this playing at murder scares me as much as a real murder; which is what you're really trying to say. And even a joker touched in the head has a reason for what he does. Somebody, for some reason, kept drawing pictures of the Founder's statue. Somebody, also for a reason, staged those careful - to - miss murder - hoaxes. But who did it? And why?'

All three of them were so absorbed that they did not hear the front door, which was usually left unlocked, softly open. It closed just as gently. What they did hear was the sound of quick, determined footsteps from the hall to the living - room, and Mark swung round. In the doorway, head high, stood Brenda.

SHE hadn't gone with Frank Chadwick, then?

Mark's left hand edged out of his coat - sleeve; the corner of his eye sought his wrist - watch. It was only twenty - five minutes past ten.

In young Mr. Chadwick's car they would have had to drive through Queenshaven, through Alexandria, across the bridge and into the Washington traffic. Brenda could not even have reached Frank's apartment, much less gone there and returned.

And yet, wherever she had been, she was very different from the Brenda who had run out of the house and slammed the door.

Brenda was now poised, head raised, all of a glow and sure, ignoring, Mark. In the white sleeveless dress, tight at the waist with a scarlet belt and a little flared in the skirt after the - fashion of '48, her whole body seemed to glow.

'Hello, you two!' she said brightly to Caroline and Toby.

'We - didn't hear you drive up.' Caroline was disconcerted.

'Oh, I didn't take the car. It's in the garage. I was at Queenshaven, and I walked back. What a beautiful night!'

Taking a red pack of cigarettes out of the red handbag, Brenda dropped the handbag on a straight chair by the open archway into the hall.

'I'd better tell you, though,' she added to Toby. 'I didn't realize there was anybody here,' and she nodded towards the closed Venetian blinds, 'until I was near the house. I thought the car outside was ours. But you know, Toby dear, you were shouting with all the windows open.'

'You heard all about it, I suppose?' Toby demanded. 'What did you hear?'

'Oh, quite a lot.'

'Brenda, I wish you hadn't!' Caroline said unhappily.

'Darling Caroline, why on earth not? There wasn't much I hadn't heard already, from the gossip around here.'

If Toby noticed nothing odd in her behaviour, Caroline gave her a quick look. Brenda swept across the room, still ignoring Mark. She sat down in an easy chair beyond the lamp, sank back, and crossed her knees. 'This business at the gym is interesting, isn't it?' she asked.

'Interesting!' exclaimed Caroline.

'Yes, isn't it?' Still brightly, Brenda laughed. 'I hope Mark can help. In any academic matter, he's very impressive. He can tell you what song the sirens sang, and why Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, and the plot of the revolutionary new locked - room novel Wilkie Collins was going to write in 1869. But in practical matters - oh, dear! He's like you, Toby.'

'Like me?'

'Yes, didn't you know? You just don't notice people or things, do you?'

'It might surprise you,' Toby retorted, 'to learn what I've noticed. Look, Mark! I'm right about this thing. I swear I'm right.'

'Wait!' said Mark.

His heavy voice, which he seldom raised, struck across the room.

'You may be right, Toby; I don't say you're not. But you're approaching the problem in the wrong way!'

'How?'

'Well, for instance. We know very little about the Johnsons - George or Hubert - - ' Toby's mouth twisted. 'We don't bother to learn much about people, do we, when they're in an "inferior" position? I know quite a lot about them.'

'Is there anyone who hates George and Hubert? Or wants to kill them?'

'The whole family?' inquired Toby, not without sarcasm. 'Anyway, the answer is no.'

'Then the joker's malice wasn't directed towards them. We can't look for a motive there. It's as though the joker were deliberately calling attention to the gym, centering and directing our thoughts there. Like an undergraduate Frank, as you said.'

'Yes, and that's what gets me.' Toby rubbed his cheek. 'This joker: his malice! Either malice, or a childish mind that can't realize what it's doing.'

Brenda's voice rose, clear and silken sweet.

'Why do you keep saying "he"? ' she asked in wonder. 'Couldn't it just

as well have been a woman?'

Caroline swung round, all the colour draining out of her face. But on Toby, after a shock of silence, the effect was different.

'Oh, lord,' he whispered, staring straight ahead, 'oh, lord, what a thick - headed so - and - so I've been!'

'Wait!' Mark said suddenly - but Toby wouldn't wait.

'I had it in my mind,' he cried, rapping his knuckles on his forehead, 'and yet I was too dense to see it. I even thought of the infirmary, but I never connected it with the gym. Of course! There's only one person it could be. Rose Lestrangle.'

Already Mark had seen this coming, and was powerless. A stir went through the room, as palpably as though Rose Lestrangle herself had entered. 'How interesting!' murmured Brenda.

'But that's absurd,' said Caroline. 'A woman?' she added in a horrified voice. 'A w - woman going into a men's gym? And laughing?'

'And laughing,'" Toby said grimly, 'is right.'

'But it isn't possible that - -'

'Angel - face, you're too innocent to live. That's just what our Rose would do, and most enjoy doing. That's her sense of humour. What did I say? A malicious mind, or a childish mind that can't realize what it's doing. I hate to sound ungallant, but she's got 'em both.'

'Toby,' Mark almost roared, 'will you listen to me?'

'Yes, Toby,' said Brenda, with her head averted. 'Please do listen to Mark!'

'I have just one question for you,' Mark insisted. 'Why should Rose Lestrangle have done all this?'

'Then I'll ask you another,' retorted Toby. 'Explain that business at the infirmary a month or so ago. And that's easy.'

'What business at the infirmary?' cried Caroline. 'Our Rose was entertaining a boy - friend there, and never denied it. She just laughed and said nobody could prove anything. Stop blushing, angel - face; and don't go all poker - faced!'

Brenda, I appeal to you.'

'Yes?' said Brenda in a clear voice. 'Have you ever heard Rose LeStrange on her favourite subject?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'Before people stopped inviting her out, she dropped some remarks that made the soup fly off the table. I remember one of them. She'd like to be made love to, she said, against (quote), "a strange or unusual background".'

'Some men, I suppose,' Brenda nodded, 'would enjoy that. Anyway, that's the gal. That's our Rose. Mind you, I don't care how many boy - friends she has. But when it comes to spite and malice at the gym - -'

'Exactly,' interrupted Mark. 'And that's where your case breaks down.'

'Mark, how in hell does it break down?'

'We can at least understand what happened at the infirmary.' Out of the corner of his eye he saw Brenda's face, but he did not stop. 'We can't understand the other. Why should she draw pictures of the Founder's statue, or make attempts, real or false, to kill George and Hubert Johnson?'

'I don't know. I admit it. All the same, being hipped on her favourite subject . . .'

'Her favourite subject isn't concerned in this. I presume you don't suggest she's three times madder than a March hare?'

'How strange, how very strange,' Brenda said to the ceiling, 'that Mark should defend her.'

'I'm not defending her, confound it! I'm - -'

'Please!' cried Caroline.

The emotional heat of the room had risen so high that it hissed when Caroline tried to cool it.

Caroline herself had recovered, though she stood by the sofa pink - faced and with a gasp in her throat. Brenda seemed the least affected: Brenda contemplated them all with a detached, impersonal stare. And yet she was turning over and over, endlessly, the unopened pack of

cigarettes in her fingers.

'F - forgive me,' Caroline apologized, 'but I seem to hear nothing at all, from my mother and Mrs. Walker and everyone else, except the subject of Rose Lestrangle. Who is she? Where does she come from? What's she doing here? That's what they keep on asking.'

'Easy, now!' muttered a nervous Toby Saunders.

'And that bungalow of hers, in Harley Lane - -!'

'In the early eighteenth century, my wench, it was called Blue Ruin Lane.'

'Well, darling, it's not called that now. Why was she allowed to buy the bungalow, they ask, even though it's no more on college property than the old tavern? And I'm sick of Rose Lestrangle! I only met her once; I didn't like her much. But I don't think she's as bad as people say. My father has a good word for her, and so has Dr. Hewitt.'

'Dr. Hewitt?' Toby demanded. 'Dr. Arnold Hewitt?'

'Yes, of course. Who else could it be?'

'Wow! ' said Toby, and snapped his fingers and was off again. 'Dr. Hewitt, the Master of Queen's, is a direct descendant of the original Septimus Hewitt. Does it explain the drawings of the Founder's statue? Can Uncle Arnold Hewitt, the old so - and - so himself, be mixed up in this?'

'Oh, Toby, that's ridiculous.'

'Yes, yes, I admit it is! I can't think of anything more unlikely. All the same, it's damn funny.'

'No, it isn't! Please!' Caroline urged again. 'I - I can't explain very well, but that's what I mean. You keep thinking of Miss Lestrangle, and you see her everywhere. You wouldn't be a bit surprised if she looked in through the window or rang at the door.'

Toby jumped and swore. Brenda sat up straight.

The noise they heard then, of course, was not the trilling of the doorbell. It was the shrill, repeated ring of the telephone in the lower hall.

Yet it struck suggestion into four minds. For perhaps ten seconds

nobody spoke. Brenda Ruthven threw the pack of, cigarettes into the chair and sat up. Carelessly, casually, she strolled towards the open archway into the hall. Then Mark was in front of her.

Brenda's white skirt swirled as she took two faster steps. Mark ran.

He put his hand over the shrilling phone, on its little table beyond the foot of the stairs; he moved behind the table, and swung round as though guarding a barrier.

At any other time that wild scramble would have been inane, even ludicrous. But it was anything but ludicrous, Mark knew the instant he lifted the phone.

Brenda had stopped by the foot of the stairs, facing him, one hand on the banisters. He saw her fixed eyes; dark - lashed, wide open, her emotions as bare as her arms. He had a half - sick realization of what he might have done. Beyond Brenda, past the banisters and through the archway, he was conscious of Toby peering out and of Caroline with head turned away.

A last peal was cut off in mid - ring. Mark put the phone to his ear, and heard a male voice.

'Yes, Dr. Kent?' he said.

Somebody sighed with relief. Mark's mind momentarily went blank.

'- if they'd mind returning here at once?' asked the voice.

'Yes, of course. Dr. Kent.' Mark woke up. 'There's nothing wrong, is there?'

'There is nothing worse, at least,' replied Caroline's father. ' But the Master has just come back in something of a hurry. He's here with me now. Er - I believe, my dear Ruthven, you're entertaining a guest on Monday?'

Dr. Samuel Travers Kent was English, though he had lived in America for thirty years. His voice alone, which could be either full or vibrant or else as vague as the famous tales of his own absentmindedness, should already have reminded Mark of something forgotten; something that returned now with a shock.

'A guest?' Mark repeated. ' Yes, a distinguished guest. Gideon Fell.'

'Gideon Fell?' yelled Toby, and hurried out from behind the coffee - table.

'Quiet, Toby!' said Mark, putting his hand over the phone and then taking it off again. 'No, no. Dr. Fell's not in America on any detective mission. He wants to see those letters I was lucky enough to discover. But I should think he'd look into the matter, if that's what Dr. Hewitt wants. Yes, I'll tell Caroline and Toby. Thank you. Good - bye.'

He replaced the phone.

Toby was standing under the archway, with Caroline beside him. Brenda had not moved.

'Dr. Gideon Fell,' Toby repeated. 'Impossible situations explained and miracles all unveiled! Isn't that the fellow?'

'Yes.'

'I thought so. He'll be right in his element, won't he, if Rose Lestrangle pulls off some more dirty work at the gym or the infirmary? And this time the door and windows are all locked on the inside?'

'Look here,' Mark said quietly. 'This has got to stop.'

'I know.' The other spoke just as quietly. 'All the same, I have a premonition - -'

'Don't have it! That's the trouble with all of us. We're poisoning our own nerves for nothing.'

Across the hall, towards Mark's right, there was the soft snap of a loosened latch. The knob of the front door slowly turned, and the door opened. A lithe woman with black and glossy hair, one foot on the threshold and one on the path below, pushed open the door with her left hand while her right hand held wide the outer screen - door behind her. Her furtive expression changed in a flash when she saw four persons in the hall. Effortlessly, with fluid and unconscious grace, she lifted the other foot and stood on the threshold.

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' smiled Rose Lestrangle. 'The door was unlocked. I do hope you don't mind?'

quite sort out the impressions of that meeting.

Behind him he heard Brenda whisper something in a tone as though past breaking - point. And yet, when Brenda instantly advanced, her manner was neither hostile nor welcoming: only neutral, polite, waiting.

'Good evening,' Brenda said. 'You're Miss Lestrangle, aren't you?'

'Yes!' said the other, holding the door wider. 'And you're Mrs. Ruthven?'

She uttered neither explanation nor further apology. She was tall, especially in high - heeled shoes. The sleek black hair fell below her shoulders. Her eyes, which could be sly and dreaming or else full on you to express secrets while concealing them, were of a light hazel flecked with green where the light touched.

But Rose Lestrangle was one of those women about whom you are less conscious of the face than of the figure. Slender and yet rounded, the white skin of a rich dusky pallor, she wore a cotton dress of pale yellow, cut in a low V in front and stretching just below the knees. All her movements had that same sinuous grace; she seemed always in motion, deliberately calling attention to it.

Her hazel, green - flecked eyes changed, reflecting the twitch of a small, full, unpainted mouth as she smiled at Mark; and the atmosphere changed too.

'How tiresome for you!' Brenda said. 'I mean, that the doorbell doesn't work.'

'I'm afraid it doesn't,' smiled Rose.

She leaned backwards, pressing the button outside. There was no sound from the bell, which had been in order three quarters of an hour before.

'Really?' cried Brenda. 'I didn't know. We must have it repaired. Please come in, won't you? I think you've met my husband?'

'Oh, yes!'

'And Miss Kent? And Dr. Saunders?'

'I've met Miss Kent once. Dr. Saunders I know a little better.'

Rose Lestrangle closed the door. It was as though, uncompromisingly, they were shut in with her. The perfume she wore, distinct and yet discreet, made its own suggesting to the nostrils. Clearly well - bred, used to the good things of life, she was very much at ease.

The same easy good - manners descended on Caroline and Toby. Those who did not know Toby's 'official' face, the one he used at the Pentagon, would have been surprised at his reserve.

'Miss Kent and I must be going, I regret to say,' he remarked, letting Caroline precede him and fishing car keys out of his pocket. 'That phone - message, I take it, was a summons back to Dr. Kent's? Yes! I thought so.'

'Oh, then it's your car outside. I didn't realize,' smiled Miss Lestrangle, and turned to Brenda. 'You see, Mrs. Ruthven, I met your husband this morning - -'

'Yes. So I've heard.'

'Oh, had you? It was the first time I'd had the pleasure of meeting him - -'

'The first time? The very first time?' (Look out! Look out!)

'Yes, the very first time,' Rose assured her, as fervently and innocently as an oversexed angel. 'And he promised to lend me a copy of Armadale.'

'Then you're interested in Wilkie Collins, Miss Lestrangle?'

'I wasn't, I'm awfully afraid, until Mr. Ruthven explained. I don't wonder Mr. Ruthven can make things so fascinating to anyone he teaches.'

'In that case, Mark,' Brenda's eyes turned, 'you'd better run upstairs and get the book. We don't want to detain Miss Lestrangle.'

'No, I certainly mustn't intrude. It's an appalling hour to call, though I'm at home to my friends at any time and I tend to forget. If you wouldn't mind getting the book, Mr. Ruthven?'

'Mark! What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing at all, my dear. Excuse me.'

At the corner of his eye, as Mark turned away, he saw Toby's thin, smoothed - out face; and he sensed the steel quality under Toby's mannerisms. 'Don't worry, old son,' Toby seemed to be saying; 'don't worry, old son; I'll handle this.'

Mark went upstairs as slowly as he could. Then, in his study, he raced past the shelves, missing the book twice before he saw its title. He could still hear their voices. He also knew with great clarity he was not the suave, unemotional man he pretended to be.

Taking down Armadale, he hurried towards the door. There he checked himself, going downstairs at a sober tread. The voices were perhaps a little more shrill.

'Thank you very much, Dr. Saunders,' Rose was saying, 'and you too, Miss Kent. But I don't really need a lift home. It's not much more than three hundred yards away, if one could go in a straight line. Besides, I have an amusing story to tell Mrs. Ruthven.'

'Oh, you'd better come with us,' said Toby, now holding the door open. 'I have an amusing story for you, too.'

Toby spoke politely. Yet there was something in his voice that made Mark intervene, much as his own nerves ached to drive the woman out of the house.

'Here you are, Miss Lestrangle.' Mark gave her the book. 'It's not Collins's best, or even third or fourth best novel. But it may amuse you if you like elaborate intrigue.'

'That's just what I do like,' Rose told him, with a peculiar smile. 'Are there murders? Shall I be frightened?'

'Ah!' said Toby. 'There's the inducement to come with us! That's what my own story is about.'

'Oh, Dr. Saunders? What?'

'Fright,' replied Toby.

He held the door wider. Already Caroline had gone out; she stood on the crazy - paved path, with the light touching her fair curly hair. Rose Lestrangle, in the doorway, glanced at Toby.

'Dear Dr. Saunders,' said Rose Lestrangle, 'I must accept your offer of a lift after all. I'm sure Mrs. Ruthven will excuse me. Incidentally, Mr.

Ruthven, don't you teach a course in the Victorian novelists?'

'Yes, Miss Lestrangle. I told you so this morning.'

'I love the Victorians,' cried Rose, glancing over her right shoulder and then back at Mark. "They led such morbidly strait - laced lives in public, didn't they, and wrote such morbidly strait - laced books? It's a joy and delight to read between the lines in both. Good night, Mrs. Ruthven. Good night, Mr. Ruthven. Thanks so much for the book.'

Her dreaming eyes moved eagerly between Mark and Brenda without the least apparent sign of mockery. The old book, bound in purple but now almost black, was pressed against the breast of her yellow dress. Gracefully she stepped down into the night, while Toby pushed open the outer screen - door.

The screen - door banged lightly as it closed. Rose, Caroline, and Toby went down the path. Mark, looking after them, heard Rose's clear, ringing laugh as they climbed into Toby's car. Toby, after backing it round in the driveway to the garage, drove off with an unnecessary engine - roar.

Still Mark watched. College Avenue, under its thick trees, curved up for nearly half a mile to end at the gates and the white pillars of the Master's house. But they would not drive as far as that. Within fifty yards the car would swing to the right into Harley Lane, once called Blue Ruin Lane, which in turn led towards the main road to Queenshaven.

The rear lights swerved and vanished. Mark, conscious that Brenda was no longer behind him, closed the big door.

She was in the living - room, where she had lighted a cigarette. Brenda did not speak or look at him when he joined her. She went round straightening chair - covers, patting sofa - pillows, tidying up where there was no need for it.

The strained, unnatural silence went on. Mark had turned away, to stamp upstairs to his study, when Brenda addressed him at last.

'So that was the woman.' She spoke casually, adjusting a lamp - shade.

'What woman?'

'The woman you're having an affair with. Rose Lestrangle.'

'Did I say it was?'

'Please don't be a hypocrite, Mark. It doesn't become you.'

My God, he thought, how long can I keep my temper?

'Did you need to say who it was?' asked Brenda in the same cool voice. 'When you deliberately dragged her name into the conversation, about that book, as soon as you knew I was going out with Frank?'

'Speaking of Frank Chadwick - -'

'We weren't. Frank isn't concerned in this.'

'It seemed to me, somehow, that he was. Do you remember, Brenda, what I actually said?'

Brenda faced him, giving the lamp - shade a sudden little shove. She took the cigarette out of her mouth, and her voice rose. 'You said you were tired of me. That's enough, surely? And, if you were tired of me, why couldn't you have told me long ago? And not taken up with an awful floosie like that, and humiliated me in my own home?'

'Let me recall to you,' Mark fought hard for self - control, 'what you said to me. You talked about your great love for young Chadwick. You announced it was all over with us, and we couldn't put the clock back. You declared, in the most martyred way, I had no right to hold you against your will.'

'And you didn't think I meant it, did you?' Brenda cried.

For a space while you might have counted ten. Mark stared at her with his expression slowly changing.

'Are you telling me,' he said, 'you didn't mean any of it?'

'I - -'

'Answer me! Put down that cigarette and answer me!'

Brenda shrank back, the pupils of her eyes dilating. In five years of marriage, when she thought she knew his every mood, she had never heard him speak like this. The shock of fright became one of anger.

'All right!' she retorted, stabbing out her cigarette on the edge of a standing ashtray. The cigarette, in a shower of sparks, fell to the carpet and smouldered unnoticed. 'All right! Maybe I did go out a lot

with him. Maybe I - I did think of having an affair with him, because you never cared two hoots about it.'

'You really believed I didn't care?'

'Well, did you?'

'Yes! More than you know or could possibly guess!'

Brenda faltered a little. 'Then . . . then why didn't you stop me from going?'

'Do you imagine I should bother to compete with an illiterate young fool who has no social interests except his money and what's called "the social round"?''

'Frank's sweet!' As his bitter mouth mimed the word she used, Brenda's fury increased. 'Oh, he may not know much about books. That's his trouble, isn't it? If any man's not intelligent in your own particular way, you and your crowd think he's beneath contempt. Don't you?'

'When it happens to be Chadwick, yes.'

'And when I think - - !' she burst out. 'Mark, do you know why I came back here tonight, after I'd already driven away with him?'

'No.'

'I was sorry for what I'd said to you. Think of that! I was sorry, because I didn't mean it.' Irony, self-loathing, made her writhe inside her white dress. 'My stupid, idiotic conscience was all over me. Frank had some very important phone-call to make at ten o'clock, so he stopped the car at Queenshaven and went into the drug-store to phone. And I slipped out of the car and walked all the way back. I thought you might be sorry for what you'd said, too.'

Brenda swallowed, and swallowed again. Tears welled into her eyes, and furiously she blinked them away.

'But were you? Oh, no! Not only were you carrying on with that awful trollop, but you praised her and defended her to my face.'

'It may interest you to hear, Brenda, that I haven't been "carrying on" with her, and never thought of it. What Miss Lestrangle said tonight was perfectly true. I met her this morning for the first time,

when she stopped me in College Avenue; and I'd never spoken one word to her before.'

Brenda stared back at him.

Her right hand was lifted. She had never seemed more beautiful or more desirable. Her generosity, her warm - heartedness, poured out along with fury, love, incredulity, and some other emotion he could not define. 'You dare say that to me?'

'Why not? It's true.'

'I don't believe it!'

'Then believe what you like.' Irony, self - loathing, love also surged up in Mark Ruthven's throat like nausea. 'I wanted to see if you cared for a taste of your own medicine, that's all.'

Brenda's face was ghost - pale except for dull colour under her eyes.

'You dare say that? When the phone rang and you thought it was her, and you ran? You ran to get to the phone in front of me, so I shouldn't know?'

'It looked like that, didn't it?'

'Only "looked" like that?'

'Yes. I lost my head. My own guilty conscience was all over me. You see, I'd tried to phone her once before.'

'Oh, you phoned her? Yet you tell me - -'

'I said tried to phone her! That was just after you left. I was going to go over to her house, and take the book she wanted, in a childish piece of "showing you ": that's all. But she was expecting somebody else, from what she said. And, before I could explain, Toby and Caroline were at the door.'

'That's all, is it? You dare! When . . . when . . .'

Brenda gasped, words choking her. Then she ran. Frantically she ran out of the room. Mark ran after her. The fallen cigarette, with a bright - glowing core, was eating at the carpet in acrid smoke.

Brenda flew straight towards the front door. Trembling all over, struck with another thought, she whirled round.

'So you only tried to phone her, did you?'

'Yes!'

'She hasn't been here six months. She's not in the phone - book. How did you know her number?'

'The number of the cottage has always been Queenshaven 13, and you know it as well as I do.'

'Do I? Do I?'

Brenda flung open the front door. Her elbow threw wide the screen - frame outside. Craning round outside, she groped to the left. A long trilling of the doorbell pealed through the house. It stopped, started, stopped and started again, clamouring with an inhuman loudness that scraped the nerves raw.

'Brenda! Stop that!'

Screen - door banged shut; front door followed it. Though Brenda was still more pale, the colour seeming to drain even from her eyes, she spoke quietly.

'The bell does work. She didn't really press it, not more than a touch. There isn't one single thing she hasn't lied about, or you either. She knew I was away tonight. She sneaked in here to go to bed with you in our house. I saw her face, if you didn't.' Brenda's voice sank to a whisper. 'Oh, God, I could kill her.'

'Brenda, stop it!'

'Do you deny she did that?'

'Yes! Every word I've told you is the truth!'

'All right! Now that I know you're a liar, as well as stupid and arrogant and only trying to hurt me as much as you can, I've made up my mind. I'm leaving this house tonight. I'm packing a bag, and taking the car, and going to Jane Griffiths's in Washington. Tomorrow I'll apologize to Frank Chadwick, and do anything he wants me to do. And just you try to stop me!'

'Brenda, I've been a fool. I'm thoroughly sick at what I've done -'

'Then you admit you've been carrying on with her?'

'I don't admit anything of the kind! And, if you want to be a bigger fool, go ahead. Go where you damn well please!'

'Oh,' whispered Brenda.

She ran past him, across the hall and up the dark - carpeted stairs. Half - way up, stumbling and tear - blinded, she turned round.

'Have a good time with your trollop. Mark. Enjoy her. Don't think I care, because I don't. But, on my way to town, I'm going to stop by and tell her exactly what I think of her. Then I can enjoy myself with Frank.'

'Brenda!'

Still stumbling, with rapid and shallow breathing whose gasps he could hear, she hurried on. Her footsteps clacked in the upstairs hall. The door of the bedroom, over the dining - room, was hurled open.

In this house, one of the newer ones built for members of the faculty in College Avenue, the walls were so thin that you could visualize movements. Something scraped and rustled on a wardrobe shelf; a big suit - case thumped the floor over the dining - room, making glass tingle there. The middle drawer of Brenda's dressing - table had its own peculiar squeak; she was wrenching at it as she pulled it open.

Mark Ruthven, who had been telling her the entire truth about Rose LeStrange, strode across the hall: to go upstairs, to end this nonsense and stop the pain. But jealousy twisted inside him; the fiercest of mental effort could not prevent it. That room upstairs, where Brenda was hurrying from wardrobe to dressing - table, held memories and intimacies remembered only too well.

He stopped at the foot of the stairs. He walked back into the living - room, rage boiling up to cloud his judgment. The cigarette on the floor had gone out, leaving ash over a burned black scar in the carpet.

And yet, for a second or two, the most vivid image in his mind was not that of Brenda, with her rich brown hair and beautiful face. It was of the person who probably caused all troubles from poisoned marriages to lunacy in a gym: the sly smile and furtive grace of Rose LeStrange.

The clock at Founder's Hall went on striking through the cooling hours of the night. Dawn, if it can be called dawn in a world of mist and heavy dew, trembled on the edge of grey.

At four - thirty in the morning, faint and distant, a rooster began to crow: three hoarse notes and a thin quaver long drawn - out. It floated away eerily and died, still coming more from the night than from the day.

Half an hour later a faraway truck rumbled on asphalt, then another. But this did not continue; there was no steady vibration as on week - days. The sky had grown lighter, though it appeared to be just as dark in the thin mist.

At half - past five Mark Ruthven was asleep in the hush and hollow of Sunday morning. At some time, which must have been much later, he dreamed and was vaguely aware that he dreamed on the edge of wakefulness, since mist had drifted into it to combine both sleeping and waking states.

In his dream he saw College Avenue. Fifty yards up from his own house, Harley Lane branched off at right - angles. Harley Lane, which he also saw, ran straight for three hundred yards before it joined the main road to Queenshaven.

There were only two houses in the lane; on opposite sides of the paved, tree - lined stretch, and not far from each other. The first house, on the right hand side, had once been an eighteenth - century tavern; recently it belonged to Dr. Daniel Walker, head of the English Department, up to Dr. Walker's death less than a year ago. His young widow still lived there.

The other house, a small one on the left - hand side, was set back from the lane. They called it 'the bungalow', or 'Red Cottage', or 'Queenshaven 13', because of its telephone - number. It was Rose Lestrangle's house. A sanded path, with a single street - lamp near by, led to the door. Thick trees shaded it, and mist smoked past the windows.

Then Mark's dream changed. He saw Brenda standing on the stairs, in his own house, looking down at him.

'On my way to town,' Brenda was saying soundlessly, 'I'm going - to stop by and tell her exactly what I think of her. On my way to town - '

That was where the dream became horror.

In this fantasy, amid what can only be called noiseless sounds, Brenda went down the sanded path into the Red Cottage. There something caught her. A telephone or a doorbell was ringing. Brenda screamed. The form that pounced at her was Rose LeStrange, or someone like her. There were thrashing, fighting noises in the dark.

'Stop! Stop!'

Mark Ruthven, shocked awake by an imaginary voice, sat up straight with the dream - strands clinging to his brain.

He was sitting, fully dressed even to his shoes, on the coverlet of the bed in the room he shared with Brenda. The room was dim and white, bitterly cold.

Mark opened his eyes hard, shook his head, and blinked towards the other bed. It had not been slept in. Brenda wasn't there.

And downstairs, in fact and not dream, the telephone was ringing.

Mark, his heart thumping, tried to peer at the travelling clock on the table between the two beds. The blurred hands seemed to indicate nearly half - past six.

It was not really cold; what he felt was only lowered vitality. Nevertheless, as he stumbled to his feet and blundered downstairs to answer the phone, dissolving cobwebs of the dream still mingled with reality.

'Yes?' he said to the phone, after clearing his throat twice.

A man's voice, unidentifiable, and soft and muffled as though it muttered through some covering, spoke distinctly.

'You're too late,' it said. 'She's done it.'

'What? What did you say?'

'Better get over to that bungalow. But you're too late. It's happened.'

'What's happened? Who are you?'

There was a soft click. The line went dead.

Mark Ruthven lowered the phone, holding it in the air before he dropped it back jangling on its cradle.

A moment later he was out of the front door, closing it carefully behind him. His steps rang on the stones of the path, and then on the asphalt of College Avenue. He had begun at a steady walk. By the time he reached the turning into Harley Lane, devil - prompted, he was running.

The mist dampened his face, clammy to nostrils and mouth; it was thicker in the lane. He had pelted past the late Dr. Walker's house, long and low and of dark brick on the right, before he came to his senses and stopped.

He was making a fool of himself. No harm had come to Brenda.

True enough, she had gone last night. She had thrown a suit - case into the car and driven away without a word. But Brenda had never meant that wild nonsense about having a row with Rose Lestrangle. And, even if she had meant it - -

The rest was all a dream: unpleasantly vivid, but still a dream.

This was the point at which Mark noticed something ahead of him. He ran forward, a dozen yards or more, swerving to the left; he stopped again, and looked left.

The front door of Rose Lestrangle's cottage was wide open.

Though only a very dim light burned there, he had seen it glimmer through rifts and tatters in the mist.

'Better get over to that bungalow. But you're too late. It's happened.'

That voice on the phone was no dream.

Hitherto Mark had moved through a dead world. Now, amid shifting white veils, he heard footsteps approaching on the asphalt.

He couldn't tell the direction. There were at least two persons; they walked slowly, and he could hear voices. Then, from twenty - odd feet away in the direction from which he himself had come, two men emerged and took shape. One was a little over middle height, with a heavy voice; the other was shortish and wiry, with close - cut light brown hair.

Catching sight of Mark, Dr. Samuel Travers Kent and Toby Saunders both stopped short. Dr. Kent showed no surprise; he never did. But Toby, who looked as though he had got as little sleep as Mark, showed

more than that. Over Toby's features, stiffening, flashed a look Mark could not decipher, except that part of it might have expressed, 'I knew it!'

Dr. Kent walked forward slowly. Toby ran.

'Mark! What are you doing here?'

'Something's wrong in there.' Mark nodded towards the Red Cottage.' The front door's open. And, only a few minutes ago, some anonymous joker phoned me there was trouble at the bungalow. Inferring murder.'

'Anonymous joker? Mur - - ' Toby's voice soared up, and stopped. 'Are you saying Rose Lestrangle has really killed somebody?'

'No!' said Mark, and controlled himself. That infernal dream had swooped at him again: of Rose leaping at Brenda to smother or strangle her; and all the worse because, in the dream. Rose had been wearing (grotesquely) a gym costume of shorts and blouse.

The car wasn't here. Brenda couldn't have been hurt; unless, of course, someone had taken the car away.

'Who phoned you?' demanded Toby. 'Did you recognize the voice?'

'No. It was muffled in some way.'

'Man or woman?'

'Man certainly. There was no mistaking the depth. I think we'd better investigate.'

'One moment!' interposed Dr. Kent. Usually what you noticed first was the twinkle in his eye, even when he wandered away into abstraction. But he was unwontedly grave, even a little shocked. Though his broad face was almost unlined in his middle fifties, the heavy hair was iron - grey.

'One moment, please!' he said. His mild tone conveyed that they couldn't go charging into somebody's house like that; and, at any other time, Mark would have agreed with him.

'I think we can,' Mark said, and hurried along the sanded path towards the Red Cottage.

'So do I!' agreed Toby, following him.

'What, precisely, was said on the telephone?' Dr. Kent's voice asked behind them both.

'The first words were, "You're too late; she's done it." And then, "Better get over to that bungalow. But you're too late. It's happened."'

Toby swore. The shape of the bungalow, with a semicircle of thick spiky trees behind and on either side, swam out at them.

It was a very small frame house, with a shingle roof, and even older than the brick house which had once been a tavern. Its boards, curved and blistered by age and sun, had faded in paint - colour to an ugly pink.

At the front there were four windows, two on either side of the door. A low lamp burned at the back of a narrow entrance - hall. The two windows on the right had been closely curtained, opaque but not quite excluding light; dim illumination touched them from inside.

The rest of the cottage was as dark and stealthy as in Mark's dream.

'I haven't been inside this place since the Pembertons owned it,' he said, nodding towards the right - hand windows. 'But, unless she's changed it completely, that's the bedroom.'

'Wait!' urged Dr. Kent, without effect.

Thrashing in bushes, Mark wormed his way past both windows. They were not large, their outer sills only waist - high. But the house had been modernized inside. These present - day sash - windows were both locked on the inside; you could not open them, or see anything beyond muffling curtains.

Toby Saunders, following Mark, rapped his knuckles on the glass and shouted Rose LeStrange's name. There was only silence amid a thick scent of wet grass and leaves.

'If the lady,' observed Dr. Kent, still mildly, 'is merely getting up early - -'

'At this hour on Sunday morning?' Toby craned his neck round.

'My dear boy, I have been up since six. Dr. and Mrs. Walker, you remember, used to get up long before that.'

'Sir, do you believe our Rose does?'

'Well - no.'

One glimpse Mark had, of Dr. Kent in his usual untidy tweeds, a fat tobacco pouch in one pocket and a literary weekly in the other, standing on the path before the door. Mark ran past him into the miniature hall, low and panelled, with a white - painted modern door on the right.

The door was locked. He wrenched at its knob, and knelt down to the keyhole. He could see the key in the lock, turned from inside. Toby, elbowing him aside, also peered through and then stood up.

He and Mark looked at each other, and slowly round the little hall. Aside from a small table with its small amber - shaded lamp, there was no ornament except a framed picture on one wall: a large black - and - white drawing, by Goya, of a Witches' Sabbath. Thin mist drifted past.

'Brenda - - ' Mark began.

'Brenda?' exclaimed Toby, astounded. 'You don't think Brenda's in there?'

'No, of course not.' Mark was controlled again. Toby turned back and delivered a violent, banging kick at the locked door.

'May I suggest,' Dr. Kent said in a louder voice, 'that we have already made our presence fairly well known?'

'Look, sir. What do you make of the words, "You're too late; she's done it." What do you make of them?'

'I can't say. Not yet. However, we can surely get in without breaking down the door?'

'Who wants to break anything? There's another way,' replied Toby, 'that we've all used on doors when we were kids. What we want is a newspaper. Any newspaper! No! wait; something else will do. Dr. Kent! May I have that Saturday Review in your right - hand coat pocket?'

'This?' asked Dr. Kent, taking out the folded copy and looking at it vaguely. 'For what purpose?'

'To help get the door open. Let me show you.' Dr. Kent's dark - brown eyes, vivid under wrinkled eyelids in a face otherwise not

wrinkled at all, held a sudden youthfulness and alertness in contrast to the heavy grey hair. He had been a notable tennis - player in his time; he still played a good game; and he held the folded magazine like a tennis - racket.

'When I said "break down the door", Toby, it was intended to be ironic. You don't really mean it? You can't mean it!'

'I mean it,' Mark Ruthven said quietly.

'Look here,' Mark went on. 'I hadn't meant to tell you this. It's ten to one you're right. Miss Lestrangle has probably taken a sleeping - pill; there's nothing wrong, and all we do is walk into embarrassment. On the other hand, there is just a remote chance my wife's in there (be quiet, Toby!), and that she's been hurt or - or worse. I cannot bother about embarrassment at a time like this.'

'I see.' Dr. Kent's wrinkled eyelids moved again. He handed the magazine to Toby.

'Mark,' the latter cried, 'you're wrong. It's not murder at all, any more than that business at the gym was! It's - -'

'Never mind what it is, yet. Go ahead.'

Toby knelt down in front of the door. He spread the magazine flat on the floor, open so that its pages were on one side and its paper cover on the other. Then he pushed the paper cover through the narrow crack under the door.

'Got a pen or pencil, Mark? You know what to do?'

Mark nodded and bent down. Using the eraser - end of a pencil, he pushed it through the keyhole, jabbing and probing at the flange - end of the key. Then he pushed it all the way through: the key dropped with a clink on the paper at the other side of the door. Carefully drawing back the paper under the door, Toby Saunders picked up the key as its head just slid through that narrow crack.

'All right!' Toby said, and stood up straight. Taking a deep breath, he drove his fist into the palm of his other hand. 'All right! You're the worried one. Mark. Open it!'

Mark took the key Toby had already handed him; he fitted it into the keyhole, turned the hard - moving lock with a snap, and hesitated with his hand on the knob.

'Open it!' said Toby. 'I tell you, you've got nothing to worry about! If there's anything at all in there, it's not murder! It's suicide.'

Mark, in the act of twisting the knob and yanking open the door, felt his whole universe turn over. Stupefaction smote him.

'Suicide?'

'Yes! Look there!'

The bedroom lay bathed in subdued amber light. A woolly soft carpet, tan in colour, almost covered the floor. The two windows, facing front and in the wall to their right, were muffled in thick cretonne curtains of cream and amber. In the wall towards their left, a broad and low bed remained undisturbed under its cream coverlet, amid a surround of small book - spaces in light - coloured wood. In the same wall, on the far side of the bed, an open door led to a bathroom. Also towards the same wall, in the near corner, a soft, empty easy - chair in vivid green stood under a reading - lamp of amber cut glass, with a purplish - black book open and face down on the little table beside it.

But all these details blurred before what sprang out at them from the wall facing the open door.

Rose LeStrange had stabbed herself through the heart. They saw her face upside down.

Against that wall stood a low dressing - table with a triple mirror, so that it seemed all mirrors. Rose, her back to the door, her knees and thighs wedged hard under the low shelf of the dressing - table, had been sitting on a padded green dressing - table stool with a low wooden back. Her body now arched backwards over it, dark hair trailing and face almost upside down towards the door.

She wore a white cotton wrap with a red sprigged flower - pattern, wound tightly round her, its cotton belt tied and knotted above the left hip. The fingers of her right hand were gripped round the handle of a knife or dagger, its silvery hilt clear against blood - spots on white. The blow was downwards; the end must have been instantaneous except for the death - spasm that wedged her amid the mirrors.

Nobody else was there. A scent of bath - salts, of cosmetics, of stale cigarette - smoke still hung in the stuffy bedroom. The three watchers, motionless, crowding the doorway, could see their own reflections in

the mirrors.

But always their gaze returned to the figure of agony below: the knife driven into its own heart, the black hair hanging down, and the wide - open eyes.

PART TWO

CLEVER WOMAN

'But there is another interest of a much higher kind, and that is the sensational.'

- Arthur Machen, Hieroglyphics.

'WAIT! Stop! Don't go in there!'

They were three men of some experience in this world. But for seconds, perhaps minutes, they were hushed, shocked, not knowing what to do.

That picture of frozen violence seemed unreal, for all its colour and outline. It was Mark Ruthven who first stirred and stepped forward. Dr. Kent spoke in a low voice.

'Wait! Stop! Don't go in there!'

'I'm not,' retorted Mark, sincerely unaware that his answer made no sense. His legs seemed light as he walked over the soft, woolly carpet.

Rose Lestrangle had stabbed herself; the evidence indicated this; Mark at the moment did not doubt it. One fear had been driven from his mind, and sanity was returning. But he must blow away the last swansdown fragment even of unreasoning fear.

Against the wall on the left of the door there was a big wardrobe, showing dresses and shoes, its door standing open. There was nobody in the wardrobe. Dr. Kent, from the doorway, spoke again.

'Don't go near - -!'

'I won't.'

Mark hastened past the dead woman, whose body was reflected more and more in the mirrors. She wore a long, white wrap, with a sprigged red pattern, and apparently she wore nothing else. She had laughed so much, and did not laugh now. The blood - spots were a

light dried red; the body seemed rigid.

Mark quickened his step. There was nobody in the small bathroom, also lighted; its coloured glass window was locked on the inside. There was no other place where Brenda could possibly be; it had all been a nightmare, of course; he could discard it, forget it, throw it away!

Back he went. Above the bed, the only picture in the room, hung a reproduction of Anton Wiertz's painting, 'The Young Witch'. The young woman in the picture, peering sideways past black hair, would have suggested Rose Lestrangle in life if she had been smiling.

And yet, before she stabbed herself (Mark looked at the purplish - dark book, with gilt letters on the spine, open on the little table by the green easy - chair) Rose had been reading a Victorian novel she had borrowed from him last night.

'Mr. Ruthven!' called a voice. 'Come out of there, please.'

Mark stared harder at the book. He was too far away to make out the worn and time - blurred title, but something seemed to be wrong. Surely . . . 'Mr. Ruthven!'

Mark stalked out. Dr. Kent shut the door of the bedroom. And then all three of them began talking at once.

Nobody could afterwards be clear as to what he talked about. Dr. Kent said that Mark lectured on marriage; Mark said that Dr. Kent countered with a spirited analysis of A. E. W. Mason's detective novels; while Toby, according to both, swore violently about the state of his feelings until Dr. Kent shushed him.

'Tut, now, that's quite unnecessary. After all, why should you be so surprised? You yourself predicted the lady would - would do what she did.'

'I know I predicted it,' Toby almost yelled. 'I know I said it. But I never expected to see it (can you follow me?), even when I did see it.'

'Toby,' Mark demanded, 'how did you know she killed herself?'

'If it comes to that,' said Toby, pausing before glaring back as though at some act of treachery, 'why did you think Brenda was here?'

'I dreamed it.'

'You dreamed it? You only dreamed about the joker phoning you and causing all this hullabaloo?'

'No, no! The phone - call was real. "You're too late; she's done it!" But the dream where Rose LeStrange strangled Brenda - -'

'Mark, are you nuts?'

'That will do,' interposed Dr. Kent, pulling himself together.

Bothered, harassed, clearly torn between his thoughts and the necessity for dealing with a practical situation he took a firm stand; and his dark brown eyes resembled those of his daughter Caroline.

'I sympathize, believe me,' he declared. ' We are suspended, all of us, like fish in an academic aquarium. We breathe but seldom move. One's own feelings, I find, are different from those in fiction. However! We must ring the police.'

'I suppose so,' Mark nodded.

'Ah, that sounds fantastic? It does to me. I discover in myself the most infernal repugnance,' his lifted fist poised in the air, 'merely for picking up the phone and saying "Get me the police". In stories they rap it out as one who should say, "Get me the plumber ". But Miss LeStrange is dead: there it is! Er - may I suggest you both have your stories ready?'

'Why is that so necessary?' Mark asked sharply.

'My dear Mark! Forgive me for addressing you as "Mr. Ruthven ". This situation is most damnably serious. It affects the college - -'

'How?'

'Come with me,' Dr. Kent's tone was just as sharp, 'and I will show you. Telephone! Where's that telephone?'

Just across the narrow hall from the bedroom door, there was another door rather larger. Toby opened it, groped to the right, and switched on lights in a white - panelled eighteenth - century drawing - room, against which shone its original fireplace and the grace and lightness of authentic Chippendale furniture.

'There's the phone,' said Toby, pointing. ' But for the love of Pete don't use it yet!'

'I have not the slightest intention of doing so,' replied Dr. Kent, who was pacing up and down, 'for a few minutes at least. Miss Lestrangle is dead!' He scowled, holding his fist in the air, and continued to pace. 'I can hardly believe it even yet. I would wish to sort out my thoughts as well as yours.'

Round the walls, incongruous against satiny Chippendale chairs, ran a series of framed black - and - white cartoons: all sizes, the originals of famous newspaper cartoonists' most savage brilliance in satire. Public figures, men and women, social and political, danced in a frieze of outlandish buffoons.

And once more Rose Lestrangle's personality smiled and rippled and writhed through the house, as strong in death as in life.

In a sense she was still alive; she would cause deadly trouble to come; and, no doubt, Dr. Kent knew it.

'For instance! Would you greatly mind, either of you,' he said with heavy diffidence, 'if I played the inquisitor? And asked a few questions I fear the police will ask?'

'No, I don't mind,' snapped Toby. 'Mark?'

'No, not - greatly. But why should it be necessary to ask them?'

Dr. Kent stopped pacing.

'Because someone is going to say this is murder,' he replied, 'and you know it as well as I do.'

The word 'murder' fell with a heavy shock. Several unpleasant possibilities had already occurred to Mark Ruthven.

'Murder? Go on!' cried Toby, attempting to scoff. 'Is there anything to suggest it was murder?'

'Is there anything to prove it was suicide?' asked Dr. Kent. 'Believe me, I am not likely to whisper murder to the police. We must make sure they can't whisper it either. We must (um!) stand to our defences, as it were. You heard Dr. Hewitt going on late last night. A scandal among our people here at the college . . . !'

'But Rose Lestrangle isn't one of the people at the college!'

'Are you sure?' asked Dr. Kent.

Taking a pair of big shell - rimmed spectacles from his breast pocket, he fitted them on and inclined his head forward.

'A while ago, Toby,' he continued, 'Mark asked a question which seemed pertinent. How did you know the lady had killed herself? Why were you so certain before we even found her dead?'

'Look, sir: I'm no psychiatrist!'

'And I am no policeman. But I do not find your reply satisfactory.' Toby hesitated only briefly.

'All right; you asked for it. That woman is morbid, flighty, unstable, the very kind who takes her own life. First of all, to mention only one point, she's sex - mad.'

Dr. Kent gave him a curious glance through the shell - rimmed spectacles; they made Dr. Kent seem older and more owlish, but no less alert.

'Toby, I don't think you understand Miss Lestrangle.'

'Hell, sir, she's made herself well enough understood to be ostracized, hasn't she? But maybe I'd better be careful. As Caroline says, you always put in a good word for her.'

'Do I?' inquired Dr. Kent, and frowned slightly. 'N - n - o. I don't think I have ever done that. What I have said repeatedly, both to my wife and Mrs. Walker, is that they do not understand her.'

'In what way, for the love of Mike?'

'One moment! We are straying from the subject.' Dr. Kent resumed his pacing, muttering to himself, and again faced Toby.

'Last night, about ten o'clock, you and Caroline went to call on Mark here. At about eleven I telephoned. I asked both of you to return. You did not return for half an hour. The only explanation you offered later was that Miss Lestrangle had been at Mark's house, and you found it necessary to drive her home.'

'Well, sir?'

'Well!' said Dr. Kent. 'You dislike the lady intensely. Mark's house is very close to this cottage. Why was it necessary to drive her home?'

'Look!' urged Toby, giving Mark a brief but agonized glance from the

corner of his eye. 'There was a ... a situation.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Our Rose was making trouble between Brenda and Mark. Brenda was quietly furious, and Mark - holy cats! I never saw a man look so guilty.'

Mark Ruthven drew out a chair from the centre table and slowly sat down, brushing his hand across the table so that he could keep his eyes down.

Brenda believed he had been having the most passionate kind of affair with Rose Lestrangle. Toby, it was clear, believed the same thing, and probably Caroline as well. Even more dangers began to crowd in.

But Dr. Kent, apparently, was not even thinking of this. Heavy and lowering, he studied Toby through the shell - rimmed glasses.

'My dear young man, you don't seem to understand. If Miss Lestrangle killed herself, what was her state of mind when you saw her last? That is what I am trying to discover.'

'Yes, that's what I mean too!' Toby tugged at his collar as though he found the neckband too tight. 'You see, on the way home I - I tried to put the fear of God into her.'

'Ah. The fear of God. How?'

'Well, I more than intimated I knew very well she was the joker playing fake murder - tricks at the gym.'

Even Dr. Kent started a little, his hand on his spectacles.

'You did? Most interesting. And when did you come to this odd conclusion?'

'What's so odd about it?' yelled Toby. 'I'd been a stupid ox; I never thought of it until Brenda suggested it was a woman. But that's just what our Rose did! What's more, I reminded her (obliquely) she'd been entertaining her boyfriends in the college infirmary.'

'One moment! How did she take the accusation of being - er - the joker of the gym?'

Toby opened his mouth, hesitated, and forced himself to speak at last.

'Badly,' he said.

'I see. And in what fashion? Was she angry, agitated, what?'

'I don't know,' Toby blurted out. 'I can't describe it. You might call her sick - looking, or desperate - looking or even something else. Maybe I went too far. I only hope to God I didn't, Anyway, she looked just in a state . . . to . . . to . . .'

'Kill herself?'

'Yes! Caroline can confirm that. But all Rose said was, "Dr. Saunders, tomorrow morning you will hear of something."'

'Um! When and where did she say this?'

'The last time I saw her alive, about eleven - thirty. All of us had been sitting in the front seat of my car,' Toby nodded towards the windows, 'out there near the street lamp. All of a sudden, when she'd said that. Rose climbed out of the car and stood there glaring while I backed the car around to drive away.'

'Did she invite you into the house here?'

'No; and we weren't keen to be invited, either. The last thing I remember is her standing there at the beginning of the path, with the street - lamp shining on her, and that infernal book pressed hard to her breast as though nobody could take it away from her because it belonged to Mark.'

There was a sharp scrape as Mark pushed back his chair on the thin Savonnerie carpet, and started to get up. But the shock inside him was not alone because of any implication in Toby's words; he had remembered something else, too.

Outside the windows of that little white room, the mist was rising and dissolving. Faint sunlight shimmered through. It sparkled on dew - wet grass as lawns and trees took shape. Mark, motionless and half way out of his chair, could see diagonally across the lane towards the house of young Mrs. Judith Walker.

Dr. Kent was motionless too.

'Yes!' he whispered, half to himself. 'Yes!' Dr. Kent repeated, waking out of his usual abstraction. 'That ought to suffice. That ought to do. That ought to satisfy the police. To anyone who did not understand

her, suicide would - -'

Dr. Kent stopped. Belatedly, harassed, he removed his glasses and held them in the air.

'One moment!' he added. 'What is all this about a book?' Mark Ruthven stood up straight.

'The book,' he replied, 'was a novel called Armadale. A one - word title. Now I know why there seemed something queer about that book in the other room. Excuse me.'

'Wait! Where are you going?'

'Only back to the bedroom for a moment. I don't have to tell you, Dr. Kent, that I own a uniform edition of the works of Wilkie Collins, published by Chatto & Windus in the early nineteen hundreds, from his first book in 1852 to his last posthumously in 1890. I bought it second - hand in London during the war; there can't be another hereabouts."

'What's Wilkie Collins got to do with this?' yelled Toby. 'That fan - whiskered son of a bitch is all over the place. Besides, Mark, you can't go. You've got too many questions to answer.'

'I must say I agree,' said Dr. Kent.

Sun flooded sideways throughout the windows, dazzling on the walls and on framed cartoons whose lampooning of famous men and women writhed in so grotesque a dance.

If what Mark suspected about the book turned out to be true, the death of Rose LeStrange was probably murder. All the more reason, then, for steadying himself and speaking lightly.

'Yes, I have questions to answer. Why, for instance, did I think Brenda might be here? Hurt or harmed or even dead? That's the first one, isn't it?'

'Yes!' said Toby.

'Well, all those questions can wait.'

'Mark, they can't wait. Dr. Kent has got to phone the cops, and the time's getting shorter!'

'They can still wait, because they have innocent explanations. We all

have innocent explanations. To take an example: Dr. Kent, what were you and Toby doing outside this house at six - thirty in the morning?'

Dr. Kent began to answer, and stopped again. He stood holding the glasses in the air, rather like a figure in one of the cartoons. Over his amiable eyes and mouth spread a look of perplexity which ended in a kind of fascination.

'Do you know, my dear fellow, I have not the slightest idea?'

Toby did a little dance on the carpet.

'Listen, sir!' he begged, with a patient and toiling lucidity. 'My name is Edward Saunders; I work at the Pentagon; I spent last night at your house because Dr. Hewitt kept raving until one o'clock in the morning. Your wife - do you remember your wife?'

Dr. Kept, fussed, spoke a little testily.

'I remember my wife. It is not necessary to use such subtle sarcasm. I merely said - -'

'Follow me!' pleaded Toby. 'You always get up at six o'clock. Mrs. Kent takes a poor view of this on Sundays, especially when you break things all over the kitchen trying to get your own breakfast. So she asked you to light out and walk to Queenshaven for the Sunday papers. Is that clear? Sir, this is serious!'

'I remember, yes. And I am quite well aware it is serious.'

'So! I wonder if Mark is?'

'Yes!' Mark retorted. 'I was trying to tell you we all have innocent explanations, if only we don't lose our heads. Now let me have a look at that book.'

And he was out of the room, shutting the door behind him, before the others could speak.

It cost an effort to go into the bedroom, considering what was now in his mind. Mark left the bedroom door open. The glow of the amber lamp was reflected back in three mirrors, dazzling over what remained of Rose Lestrangle.

Mark turned his eyes away. Over in the corner, where the green easy - chair stood several feet out from the angles of the wall, the

book still lay face - down on the little table under the reading - lamp. And he had been right: the blurred gilt lettering on the spine showed four words in the title, not one.

The book was not Armadale. It was Wilkie Collins's far more famous novel, The Woman in White.

And that altered the whole affair.

Mark picked up the book, and turned over the pages. It was certainly his copy of The Woman in White, with his own pencilled notes. His hand shook when he put it back again, exactly as it had been before.

Carefully he reviewed the events of last night. He could lie absent - minded, of course. People might think, as he him - self would be expected to think, that he had simply taken down the wrong book from a row of identical - looking volumes in the same edition, and handed the wrong book to Rose.

But he had done no such thing.

Even in haste, even flurried, he had not made that mistake.

Too clearly he remembered seeing the title, Armadale, as he took the book from the shelf. Too clearly he remembered glancing at it again, as Rose herself did, when he handed the text to her at the door.

Yes, and something else!

As he reached up for Armadale in his study, he had noticed the other book there. The Woman in White, more worn and faded because more read, stood out vividly from the others. He had seen it, two or three volumes to the right, in its proper place on the shelf.

Someone, here in this room and in the middle of the night, had substituted one book for the other.

Why?

But that was not the point. The main point - -

'Oi! Ss - s - t! Mark!' a voice hissed at him from the doorway.

Toby, as pale as chalk, was alternately studying him and glancing over his own shoulder towards the drawing - room.

'The old boy's phoning the cops. There isn't much time, Mark. Have you got anything to tell me?'

'How do you mean?'

'Listen,' said Toby, breathing hard. 'I owe you a lot. I'm good at research, and I know my stuff. But I can't fit it together or sling the words quite the way you and Sam Kent and Luther Mason can. I'd never have got my doctorate, and you know it, if you hadn't helped me.'

'I didn't do anything at all! Lord, you're not still thinking of that? All those years ago?'

'Yes. I'm thinking of it. I'm an outer barbarian; and you carried me. So: have you anything to tell me now?'

'Toby, I honestly don't know what you mean. But I do have something to tell you. That wasn't suicide. It was murder.'

Against the hush of morning, they both heard the noise of a car approaching in Harley Lane outside. But it only faintly trailed across the consciousness of both Mark and Toby, because of the latter's stare.

'Mark,' he said in a wild voice, 'are you really nuts?' He stabbed his finger towards the body wedged under the dressing - table shelf. 'Are you as stark, raving mad as your girl - friend there?'

'She's not my girl - friend! She never was!'

'All right, have it your own way! But will you for God's sake, if not your own, stop talking about murder?' Mark came to his senses.

'Yes, I - sorry. I spoke without thinking.'

'Listen!' Toby raised his hand.

The car in the lane had slowed down and halted just outside. After a hesitation, the car - door opened and slammed. Light footsteps, quick and then hesitant, hovered on the sanded path to the front door.

'That's a woman,' Mark said. 'It may even be Brenda.'

'Whoever it is,' snapped Toby, 'we mustn't have anyone else in here. Head her off! Come on!'

Together they plunged through the narrow hall, impeding each

other, to the open front door.

It was not Brenda, nor was it necessary to stop her.

In the centre of the path, facing them from a dozen feet away, stood the rather - too - young Mrs. Judith Walker, widow of the former head of the English department.

Judith Walker's head was turned towards their right, fixed, in the direction of the drawing - room windows. Against strong sunshine, heating the front of the house and turning its rooms stuffy, Judith Walker's sturdy, rather small figure stood out because she was wearing mourning after nearly a year. They saw a fine pale complexion, now paler still, under the red hair.

Dr. Samuel Kent had evidently found it necessary to raise a window. He was speaking to the telephone: in a low voice, but it carried clearly. And he was not yet speaking to the police.

'Yes, Dr. Hewitt! She was stabbed. You can see only the hilt of the weapon, a long silver hilt. I feel sure it was the eighteenth - century dagger she kept here, sharp and polished, among the other antiques. Yes!'

Judith Walker made a convulsive movement. Her head jerked back towards Mark and Toby. Her blue eyes, above the violet hollows of sleeplessness, above dilated nostrils and a mouth painted dark red, seemed to light up.

She cried out to Mark and Toby. Her husky voice, usually gentle, went into a strange and startling pitch.

'So somebody's killed the slut at last,' she said. ' Who did it? Her lover?'

7

NEVER before had they heard Judith speak like that.

Toby stood back, his Puritan sensibilities plainly shocked. Mark, virtually unshockable, felt only a pang of pity and did not know why.

A moment more Judith Walker, who had always so much admired a husband thirty years older than herself, remained with her lower lip pulled down as though on the edge of tears. Her left hand gripped a dark handbag. Her right hand fumbled and fumbled at the left side of

her black dress, as though in search of something missing.

If she had heard Samuel Kent's voice, he must have heard hers. Though not changing tone, though not louder, Dr. Kent's next words became pointed and firm.

'I am afraid. Dr. Hewitt, you do not understand. The door was locked on the inside. Both windows, when Mr. Ruthven and Dr. Saunders tried to break in, were also locked on the inside. The police will discover it was suicide.' A pause. 'Yes, Dr. Hewitt. No doubt, as you say, that will be more convenient.'

Judith, who had again twitched her head towards the windows, turned back again and grew rigid. The lower lip trembled.

Mark went towards her. Instinctively he put out his hand and, just as instinctively, Judith grasped it. It was sometime difficult to think of this sturdy, red - headed girl as being the scholar she was.

'Mark,' she said from down in her throat, 'I can't think what happened to me. That was a dreadful thing to say. I'm so very, very sorry.'

'There is nothing to be sorry for, Judith. But you don't want to see what's in there. Come with me.'

His steady voice had an infinite power to soothe. Still clasping her hand, which was cold, he began to turn her round towards the front of the path.

'She is dead, the - what I called her?'

'Yes.'

'I hated her. I wouldn't have harmed her. But I hated her.'

Gently Mark put his arm across her shoulder, which was not cold, and guided her. At first she seemed to fight him; she grew tense as though she would whip round and stare at the Red Cottage. But still gently he led her to the old Plymouth car, which Dr. Dan Walker had driven for so many years and refused to turn in.

'It's only an attack of nerves, Judith. We've all had one this morning, and worse than yours. Shall I drive you home?'

'But it's only a step!' She nodded diagonally across the lane. 'There's

no need to drive anywhere. I'm quite all right now, I assure you. May I stand here and talk to you for a minute?'

'Of course.'

'I can't sleep,' said Judith. Rather quickly she drew her fingers away from Mark's, and threw her handbag on the front seat of the car. 'Dan used to get up very early, at five o'clock sometimes; and I accustomed myself to that. Now I can't sleep at all. When I went for a drive very early this morning, mist and all, the front door of that bungalow was open and the light was on. I wondered if something might be wrong. But I didn't really think so until I came back just now. With the lights all on, and Sam Kent telephoning. Mark! Do you mind if I talk about her?'

'Are you sure you want to?'

'Yes, yes, yes!'

A smile curved across Judith's dark - red mouth. Though she was still fumbling vaguely at her waist or side, as though conscious of having lost something, her alert intelligence shone in the shadowed blue eyes.

'Sometimes that's best, Mark. However one feels. Unless we tell the truth when we're upset and in the proper mood, we may never tell it.' Judith made a sharp gesture, speaking abruptly. ' And I didn't tell you why I hated her.'

'That's none of my business.'

'How like you, Mark! Good old New England! Now that she's dead, though, it's going to be everybody's business. I want to tell you something I've never told you before.'

Judith looked quickly towards the bungalow, seeking Toby. But Toby had been called into the little drawing - room for a word with Dr. Kent, who was again dialling the phone. Both of them could be seen through the window.

The morning had begun to deepen into cloudless, still heat, with the grass a more emerald green and the leaves acquiring a dark shimmer. Odours of earth thickened round the footpath beside the asphalt road. Where Mark and Judith stood, near the lamp - post and in the shadow of a tree, there was a sense of intimacy.

'When Dan died,' Judith said, 'I was very lonely. Then she,' and she nodded towards the bungalow, whose curved old boards were a blistered and coquettish pink, 'she came to live there. She could be very sympathetic when she tried, and she was surprisingly well - read. I saw quite a lot of her before I discovered what she was.'

'Meaning - -'

'I called her a slut. That was an awfully bad choice of words: I meant she was promiscuous. But to tell you the honest truth,' Judith made a wry mouth, 'I should never have minded her being promiscuous, though I had to pretend I did when I talked to the other faculty wives. No! It wasn't that at all.'

Again Judith raised the fierce, haunted, dark - blue eyes.

'She was clever, insinuating, and horribly cruel. If she could make a man fall for her, she'd almost squirm with delight. And I'm quite certain that physically she was as cold as a fish.'

'Cold?' Mark exclaimed incredulously.

'Yes. Just that.'

'Aren't you making her out to be rather complicated?'

'No, on the contrary! There are any number of women just like her. It flatters their vanity to be thought a grande amoureuse, that's all.' Judith's mouth tightened. 'Rose loved the pose; she revelled in it; and then, when she did take another lover, she had to pretend ecstasies in what to her was the tiresome reality.'

Mark swept the suggestion aside. 'But this latest conquest of hers: you know who he is?'

'Oh, I know. And it really doesn't matter in the least.'

'Doesn't matter?'

'No, not in the sense I think you mean. Because he isn't in any way connected with the college.'

There was a pause which sounded like thunder in Mark's ears.

'Judith, are you sure of this?'

'I ought to be sure. I've seen him often enough, going into the

bungalow in the middle of the night. I even saw them creeping into the college infirmary, and her opening the door with a key.'

Judith drew herself up, like the schoolmistress she had once been; but she trembled.

'I'm greatly afraid,' she added, with a tinge of colour in her cheeks, 'that makes me sound like a spy. And I'm not a spy! I've spread no gossip, whatever people may think. It is simply that I can't sleep; I sit up at the window, or go for walks in the college grounds. That was how I saw them at the infirmary.'

There was no mistaking him or her either, with that height and figure.'

'Who's the man, then? What's his name?'

'Really, Mark! You seem - -'

'Yes! I have a great interest in proving who the fellow isn't.'

'Well, I don't know his name. But quite a lot of people must have seen him at times. He's young, and he drives a conspicuous car. Does that mean anything to you?'

'Not off - hand, no. Young men who drive conspicuous cars are fairly common in these parts. And we've got to find him.'

'Mark, please don't misunderstand me! When I made that stupid outburst a while ago, it was only an attack of nerves because I hated Rose and I admit it. I had no intention of accusing him. I didn't really mean he killed her.'

Metaphorically speaking, Mark put on the brake hard.

'Nobody killed her, Judith. Surely you heard Dr. Kent say it was suicide?'

Judith lowered her eyes, wavered, and steadfastly looked up again. 'Yes, I heard him say it. But I can't honestly believe it. Can you?'

'Why not?'

'Oh, Mark, why do you think I've been saying all I have said? Even to you? That is,' amended Judith, colouring up under the red hair and hastily correcting herself, 'even in private? Because it won't be private much longer; because there'll be an investigation; because that woman

never, never, never killed herself. She was too greedy for life.'

Devils, all abuzz, swarmed back once more.

'Listen, Judith - -!'

'Do you believe she did?'

'Let me explain. We found her stabbed through the heart in the bedroom. The door and windows, as you heard, were locked on the inside. The only other way in or way out was the bathroom window. And that, as I can testify if the others can't, was also locked on the inside.'

Again there was silence. Judith Walker sighed.

'Yes. I dare say. Yes, you must be right.'

She was contemplating the ground. With the toe of her shoe, black suede below a nylon stocking, she slowly pushed a pebble forward in the dirt. And then, when all seemed settled and the sigh was a sigh of acquiescence, Judith's red head suddenly jerked up. He wanted to turn from her eyes.

'The door, you say, was only locked on the inside? With a key? No bolt, no bar, nothing of that kind?'

'No! Why should there have been?'

'Because in the old days, and not so long ago either,' Judith cried, 'that would have been no problem at all to you or Sam Kent or poor Dan! Why, I've heard you yourself explain at least four trick ways of turning a key in the lock from outside. And that's not all! What Dan told me: was it true?'

'About what?'

'About the brand - new material,' breathed Judith, 'for your biography of Wilkie Collins?'

It might have seemed a bright and burning day. It was not. Down on Mark Ruthven swooped the worst devil of all.

'In 1868, I think it was,' breathed Judith, 'Wilkie Collins wrote The Moonstone. It was the first fair - play detective novel, with all the clues given. He knew it was; he wrote to his American publishers and said he had some effects never used before in fiction. He was so

enthusiastic that he planned another such novel, this time about a death in a locked room, which should look like suicide but turn out to be murder. Is that true?'

'I -'

'He planned the new novel for '69,' said Judith. 'He outlined the plot in some letters to Dickens, just as he did with *The Moonstone*. And you have the letters to Dickens, together with Collins's notes, showing exactly how he meant to do it? Is that true too?'

'Yes. In the main it's true.'

'And he never wrote the novel?'

'No, he never wrote it.'

'Mark, what have I said? What on earth is the matter with you?'

'Judith, my wife and I are the only two living people who knew the plot of that unwritten novel. Are you so anxious to have one of us suspected of killing Rose LeStrange, and then locking up the room with a trick invented by a dead man?'

The dappled shadow of the beech, growing shorter and denser round them, made Judith's pallor seem more great against black dress and red hair. She stood rigid, hardly appearing to breathe. The dark - blue eyes seemed almost black. Judith has said afterwards that it was all the worse because the trick might have been invented by a dead man.

Then she swallowed hard.

'Mark, I'm afraid I have been very foolish again. But I never dreamed; I never realized! And, in any case! The trick, whatever it was, couldn't have been used here. You said yourself the key was only turned in the lock. There are at least four ways of turning a key from outside!'

'Suppose you have a key that can't be tampered with? And window - locks that can't be tampered with either?'

'But that's impossible.'

'Oh, no, it isn't.'

Digging his fists into his pockets, Mark remained lost in memory.

'Wilkie Collins, admittedly, was never a major literary figure. But you could call him the wily serpent, the plot - master, whose ingenuity even Dickens envied. Don't think of him as all beard and spectacles and Victorianism, as Toby Saunders does. He was an amiable Bohemian, who hated the stuffiness of life and kept a mistress openly in his house. And, if I'm right about The Dead Man's Knock - -'

'The Dead Man's Knock? Was that the title of the projected novel?'

'Yes. How he conceived the idea, and why he abandoned it, form one of the most fascinating accounts in Victorian literary history. If I'm right, I repeat, he meant to try a locked - room device never used in fiction before or since.'

'You - you know what the device was?'

'That's the trouble! If I knew all of it, or on the other hand none of it, I could defend myself. But I know just enough, say three quarters, to land me in serious trouble if the police learn of it.'

'Your husband, Judith, was my boss in the English department. I told him, under secrecy, but I never knew he'd mentioned it to anyone else.' Mark gritted his teeth. 'All the same, I can't impose conditions on you. Not in a mess like this. You're free to give it away if you think that's best.'

Impulsively Judith stretched out her hands to him. 'Give you away? Do you think I should give you away?'

'Mark,' struck in another voice, 'where is Brenda?' And Mark Ruthven's heart rose up in his throat. He had not heard Toby approach on the sanded path to the Red Cottage. Toby was standing there, in the hot sun just outside the shadow of the tree, one hand shading his eyes. How much he had heard nobody could tell.

Behind him, just stepping down from the front door. Mark saw Dr. Samuel Kent with his pipe in his mouth. That was when he first felt enemies closing in, though these enemies were only friends trying to help him. "Where is Brenda?" he repeated. 'Why do you ask?'

'Don't give me the old brush - off!' said Toby. 'When you wouldn't say anything for yourself, the governor,' and he jerked his thumb back towards Dr. Kent, who had just stopped, 'phoned your house. It's ten minutes after eight; Brenda would have answered if she'd been there. Where is she?'

'Haven't you both got a damned nerve, Toby? Phoning my house?'

'Not if it's for your own sake, no! Look, Mark - -!'

'Brenda decided to spend the week - end with an old friend of hers in town. Surely I told you?'

'No! No, you didn't tell me! Brenda didn't intend to do that, did she, when Caroline and I were at your house last night?'

'And you didn't intend to spend the night at the Kents' house, either. But you did. Explain your own incredible behaviour.'

'Mark, come off your high horse!'

'Then come off yours.'

'Look!' said Toby, weakening and then appealing. 'On her way to Washington, was Brenda going to stop here at the bungalow?'

'No. Certainly not.'

'Then why did you expect to find her here this morning? That's the only question; and don't take offence where none is intended! Don't - -'

Toby paused.

He was looking past Mark, and at Judith Walker, in so strange a fashion that Mark turned too. Judith's fingers were again touching her waist and side, as though vaguely conscious of something missing; but she dropped her hands in astonishment. 'Toby Saunders, what are you staring at? It's not exactly serious. I've only lost my belt.'

'Belt?' repeated Toby. His hands darted to his own belt.

'Toby, Toby! Not a leather belt with a metal buckle, like yours! The cloth belt to this dress.' Judith, looking puzzled, spoke sharply in her husky voice. 'It gets warm, and you loosen it. Or you sit down to drive a car, and it seems tight; so you loosen it. Sometimes it can slip off without being noticed.'

Another powerful shade of expression, quite unreadable, crossed Toby's face. But he spoke mildly.

'Sorry, Judith. And excuse me, Mark, if I drove you. For the love of Pete, though, go and have a word with the governor! Will you do that?'

'And I must be going too,' Judith said. 'Really I must be going!'

But she did not go; she remained under the tree, looking after Mark as Mark strode up the path. Toby followed him. Samuel Kent was smoking a pipe just outside the front door.

Mark, rapidly arranging defences, smiled at both of them.

'We all seem to have flown off the handle a little,' he declared. 'Forgive me, Toby. And yet, as I told you, the explanation of my behaviour and Brenda's is very simple, provided nobody makes sarcastic noises when I mention a dream. A dream, and a voice on the phone, were the cause of it all.'

'Yes?' said Dr. Kent, taking the pipe out of his mouth.

Mark braced himself.

'Last night, at my house,' he continued, 'Toby outlined a graphic and detailed theory of how Miss Lestrangle nearly committed two murders, real or false, in the gymnasium. It was more than graphic; it was frightening. It badly frightened Brenda; I admit it disturbed me. You'll agree with all this, Toby?'

'Yes,' replied Toby, without looking at him.

Mark faced Dr. Kent.

'Brenda was so upset by the near - murders that she drove in to visit Jane Griffiths, on Connecticut Avenue. Do you blame her? I sat up in my study, smoking pipe after pipe as you yourself do, and stumbled off to bed, still dressed, at four in the morning.

'We needn't invoke Dr. Freud to explain my nightmare. During the nightmare I saw Miss Lestrangle, dressed in a gym costume, leap out at Brenda to strangle or smother her: here, in a dark cottage. Surely I told you this?'

'Part of it,' muttered Toby.

Dr. Kent nodded.

'During the most terrifying part of the dream,' Mark continued, 'the phone rang downstairs. I was still half - immersed in nightmare when a man's voice spoke these words, 'She's done it,' and ' it's happened,' and the rest.

'What did I think? What would anyone think? Being already dressed, I ran straight out of the house and over here with the dream - state still on me. If you ask why I insisted on having the bedroom door open, remember this happened only a minute or two after we all arrived; the dream - state hadn't entirely gone.

'Even then I said probably nothing was wrong. I said we should walk only into embarrassment. Haven't you ever had a mistaken impression so vivid, even when you were wide awake, that you must go downstairs again to make sure you've turned out the light or switched off the radio?'

Casually Mark took his hands out of his pockets, dismissing it.

He couldn't tell whether they believed him. Toby was still turned away. Samuel Kent, as Sphinx - like as ever, smoked meditatively.

'And that is all?' asked Dr. Kent, taking the pipe out of his mouth again. 'That is all, on your word of honour?'

'That is all,' lied Mark, 'on my word of honour.'

Still he couldn't tell whether they believed him. They were as quiet as Judith Walker, still watching him from thirty feet away. The hot sun beat down.

'Well!' Dr. Kent said at length, in such a tone that Mark breathed with relief. 'Well! That should do. The police, I think, will credit me.'

'Credit you?' asked Mark.

Samuel Kent looked faintly exasperated.

'Yes. This is an administrative affair; it does not concern me. But Dr. Hewitt has asked me to deal with it until the Dean returns. I have phoned him; I have phoned my home (no, no, I have said nothing there except that an accident has occurred here, and we shall be delayed); finally, I have rung the police. Consequently, Mark, you had better get on home at once.'

Mark was very anxious to get home, for more reasons than one. But an arrow of distrust shot through him.

'Do you doubt what I say? You don't want me to hide from the police?'

'Tut! No! Nonsense!' protested the other, spitting smoke.

'Well, then?'

'Merely go home and remain there. Should the police visit you, after they have talked to me . . .'

'Yes?'

'Then tell them! We believe the lady's death to have been suicide' - suddenly Mark realized that this had become the official version, that not a soul among them believed it, and that they were pitching horseshoes with high explosives - 'according to the evidence. Otherwise, tell them your own story as you have told me. Now please go! A police - car should arrive at any moment!'

At that moment, in fact, a car was clanking along Harley Lane from the direction of College Avenue. But it was a disreputable car, far older and even more decrepit than that of the late Dr. Walker; and it was being driven by Caroline Kent.

A realization of their game against the law struck all three men at once.

'Confound the girl!' said Dr. Kent, meaning his daughter. 'I dislike to speak strongly, but confound it all! Why will she insist on driving my car?'

Toby whirled round.

'Look, sir! Odd as it may seem to you, Caroline's grown up. She's twenty - seven! She's marrying me in September! Don't you think she's old enough to drive a so - and - so - ing jalopy?'

Dr. Kent violently blew a film of ash off his pipe.

'The car, young man, is now elderly and even in its youth was never addicted to such lascivious habits. Please control your language.'

'All right, all right! But what I was saying - - !'

'Nor do I express my own views on discipline, but those of my wife. Even today, should Caroline or her brother stray a hundred yards from college property, Lenora is convinced that the one will be seized by white - slavers and the other, no doubt, by tempters of the Demon Rum. Great Scott, Mark, are you still here?'

In case he himself should be tempted to blurt something he would regret, Mark hurried away.

As Caroline pulled up the car and jumped out, Judith Walker greeted her with excited news. It was discourteous to avoid them, but Mark took a short - cut across the smooth lawn. In the distance he saw Caroline's eyes open and shy away as she lifted her head towards the bungalow.

'Stabbed?' she was crying. 'Lying back in the chair. With what knife?'

'No, no! A dagger! And not a chair at all. Your father said - -'

Mark ran.

Most of his worries would be over, he decided, as soon as he could reach Brenda by telephone. Their stories must agree, if anyone questioned her.

Of course, she had never gone anywhere near the Red Cottage last night. He could take that as granted, read, established.

Unshaven, breakfastless, rumpled in mind as well as clothes, he was not really thinking of these things; nor was he, at the back of everything, too much troubled in case Brenda's story should not agree with his. He wanted to speak to Brenda, to hear her voice, and to end this nonsensical quarrel.

The front door of his house was unlocked, as he had left it; he was supposed to lock it before he went to bed at night, but half the time he forgot to do this as he had forgotten last night. He flicked through the phone - book, found Jane Griffiths's number, and was already picturing Brenda answering when he dialled.

The ringing - tone buzzed and went on buzzing. Mark was beginning to study the phone uneasily when he heard a drowsy voice, hoarse with sleep and not too pleased.

'Yes?'

'Jane? This is Mark Ruthven.'

'Who?'

'Mark Ruthven! ' It was pronounced in the Scottish way, as though it were Riven, and sometimes he had trouble. ' Don't say you don't

remember me.'

'Oh! Mark! Hello! But why do you want to wake a girl up in the middle of the night?'

'I'm sorry, Jane; but may I speak to Brenda?'

'Who?'

There was a pause. A pang of alarm shot through his mind; he divined Jane's answer before she made it.

'But Brenda's not here. Mark! She hasn't been here! Why did you think so? Isn't she with you?'

At well past nine o'clock that same Sunday evening, as dusk was settling down, a certain joker moved and sprang and threw a bolt of fear in the New Library at Queen's College.

It came only at the end of a day's turmoil.

Dr. Arnold Hewitt, the Master of Queen's, had refused to answer questions from the police or the press. To the student - body Dr. Hewitt seemed hardly a member of the faculty, though in fact he was Septimus Hewitt, Professor of Latin, and gave two excellent courses: one in the poets, playwrights and historians, the other in medieval Latin prose and verse.

With his bald head, his out - thrust neck, his eyes squinting rather testily over half - glasses, he seemed instead a sharp man of business (which he was) or a man of the world and something of a dandy (which he also was).

Closeted away in his study, in the big white - pillared frame house whose grounds made a dead - end of College Avenue at the top, Dr. Hewitt spoke only to the phone. He had nothing to say as yet, he announced; the matter, so far, was in the good hands of his deputy at Red Cottage.

And at the cottage, through all the morning and most of the afternoon, so many police and press cars choked Harley Lane that the road was closed.

Though there had been so much buzz and speculation about Rose LeStrange in life - who she was, where she came from, all the rest - it did not take the police and the press three hours to discover

everything outwardly known of her.

Miss Lestrangle, born in Baltimore thirty - one years before, was the daughter of Old Nick Lestrangle, who had owned a coast - to - coast chain of newspapers. She had been educated at a New York finishing - school and in Switzerland. When Old Nick died in '38, the newspaper - chain had been sold; his money was divided between Rose and a mother since deceased.

'There's a morbid streak in the whole family,' came the report. 'Her grandfather poisoned himself with strychnine, the most painful stuff there is, and it wasn't an easy death.'

No scandal concerning Miss Lestrangle could be unearthed, or at least was mentioned. Though she had been engaged to be married three times, the engagement was broken on each occasion by Miss Lestrangle herself.

The word suicide began to ring loudly above the uproar in Harley Lane. And Arnold Hewitt had been right in saying he left the matter in good hands.

Those who doubted it was in good hands had never seen Dr. Samuel Kent in a classroom: impassive, imperturbable, facing a fire of questions from young men in an argumentative mood. In the same way, amiably patient, he met the fire of the polite but tenacious Detective - Lieutenant Henderson.

The weapon of death (identified by Dr. Kent) was an eighteenth - century dagger with a narrow steel blade, double - edged and needle - pointed, and a silver hilt and silver handle inlaid with mother - of - pearl. It was always kept polished and sharp.

The time of death (roughly estimated by the medical examiner) should have been between one a.m. and three a.m. on Sunday, allowing half an hour margin on both sides. When the body had been removed for an autopsy, the atmosphere was less strained.

In fact, you could say more than that. Dr. Kent had a habit, well known at Queen's College but not to outsiders, which faintly amused even Lieutenant Henderson and positively endeared him to the reporters.

When he was delivering his famous series of lectures on the Tudors and the Stuarts, Dr. Kent would constantly put on and take off his shell - rimmed glasses. Each time he did this, deeply absorbed in his

lecture, he would take from his pocket a thick packet of toilet - paper. Absentmindedly detaching one sheet, he would gravely polish his glasses, replace the glasses, and let the paper float away.

After thirty years the hilarity at the college had gone; his classes never even noticed it. But the effect on police and press, as he answered questions in the Chippendale drawing - room and obviously forgot where he was, had to be quelled by fist - bangings on the table from Lieutenant Henderson.

Now, then! About this dagger! Was the witness sure, Lieutenant Henderson wanted to know, it had belonged to Miss Lestrangle? Dr. Kent was sure.

Well, but why was it always kept polished and sharp? Dr. Kent could not tell. However, when he and his wife once had dinner here, Miss Lestrangle remarked she was very fond of sharp steel.

Then, frankly, wasn't she a pretty funny kind of a lady? Dr. Kent would not like to say funny. At the same time, considering what he had now heard about her family history - -

Yes, thanks! Lieutenant Henderson had meant just that. But had she sat down in front of a mirror and stabbed herself, as women suicides sometimes did, because she was just plain depressed? Or was she worrying about something? A boyfriend, maybe?

At this point in the questioning, by one of those chances which may help or hurt, a certain Sergeant Billings had marched in with Mrs. Judith Walker, whom he had been ordered to round up merely because she was the only neighbour and might know something.

The reactions of the red - haired Mrs. Walker, when she heard the last question, were so marked that Lieutenant Henderson for a time devoted his whole attention to her.

He did not want to trouble her, ma'am; and he would be as brief as he could. Had the deceased lady been interested in any particular men?

Well, yes, Mrs. Walker admitted. Would Mrs. Walker explain herself, please? Mrs. Walker wished to say first she was sure there had been nothing improper or even indiscreet in the relations between Miss Lestrangle and this young man. Miss Lestrangle was moody, apt to be depressed even by a slight misunderstanding - -

Whatever she said, of course; but who was the man?

Mrs. Walker was not personally acquainted with him, but could describe him and his car.

Did he visit Miss Lestrangle last night?

No.

Did anybody visit Miss Lestrangle last night?

No.

Mrs. Walker hesitated before she said that, didn't she?

No!

That last monosyllable, like a struck bell of danger, was only one fragment of an interrogation of Dr. Kent and Mrs. Walker which had begun at half - past eight in the morning and was going on at twenty minutes past five in the afternoon, when Toby Saunders phoned Mark Ruthven with the last of the information given above.

Toby, exiled by Dr. Kent from the scene of the investigation as Mark had been exiled, nevertheless had contrived to hang on the fringe of the crowd. There, where he was only ignored or pushed out of the way, he had managed to hear most questions and answers through wide - open windows.

Afterwards, at intervals, he would run over to Judith Walker's house and telephone Mark, as he was doing now.

'Holy cats!' said Toby's voice, making carbon crackle. 'Judith and the old man are covering up for the college. They're painting our Rose's character as sweet and pure - minded and innocent, only a little morbid and inclined to stick a dagger in her chest.'

'Well, you claimed it was suicide this morning.'

'I still do, officially.' A slightly ugly note crept in and disappeared. 'Anyway, the one I admire is the old man. He's been talking for hours, without a bite to eat except when Henderson sent to the drug - store for sandwiches and cartons of coffee; and yet he hasn't told one actual lie. It's all done with implications. Incidentally, are you shaved and presentable by now?'

'Yes. And this all - day wait is getting on my nerves. When do the

police want to question us?'

'They don't want to question us. Not yet, anyway.'

'Have you forgotten we discovered the body?'

'No; but Dr. Kent explained that too. He and I were walking to Queenshaven to get the Sunday papers, which is true. As for you: some mysterious man, in a panic, phoned you and said Rose LeStrange had killed herself. Naturally, as a friend, you rushed over there at once. What's wrong with that version?'

'Nothing, except that it's not true.'

'It's true if you just quote the words you heard, isn't it?' The voice grew pleading. 'Better keep it simple, Mark. Don't crowd your luck. Besides, except for one thing that worries me, every fact is stacking up towards suicide: even the book Rose was reading before she stabbed herself.'

'Oh?' Mark was sharply at attention.

'Yes! It was a novel, *The Woman in White*, by our fan - whiskered Victorian friend. All about a morbidly lonely woman named Anne Cathcrick.'

Mark drew a deep breath. 'By the way, Toby: what was the title of the book Miss LeStrange borrowed from me last night?'

'Why, I've just told you! It was - -'

'Oh, no. Think! You must have seen the title, from your description of how she carried it. Caroline would have seen it, if you didn't. So would Brenda. Think!'

Long pause. You could hear breathing.

'Come on, Toby! What was the title?'

'Something called *Armadale*,' whispered the other.

'Right. She took it home with her. And then, in the middle of the night - or, rather, early in the morning - somebody took away my annotated copy of *Armadale* from the bedroom and substituted my also - annotated copy of *The Woman in White*.'

'Look, Mark! Why should anybody do that?'

'I can't tell. I haven't the slightest idea.'

'Maybe Rose herself - -'

'Oh, no. That won't do either. When we found Miss Lestrangle this morning, the spurted blood - spots had dried and the body was rigid. And, as you've told me yourself, the doctor puts the time of death between one a.m. and three a.m., allowing perhaps half an hour's margin on either side.'

'Well?'

'Well, follow me. Brenda left here last night at about ten minutes to midnight. My copy of *The Woman in White* was still here. Immediately, as I told you, I went up and sat in my study until four o'clock in the morning. You see what that means?'

'I'm not dumb, Mark.'

'Right! It means somebody came into this house (the front door was not locked) after I had gone to sleep at four o'clock. Somebody took *The Woman in White* from the shelf in my study, and changed it for the other book. The second thing I did, after I returned here this morning, was go up to the study and look. My copy of *Armadale*, with the title - page and half a dozen other pages torn out of the front, was back on the shelf.'

'Maybe you - -'

'Made a mistake? I didn't, Toby. And don't ask me why harmless pages should be torn out, either; I don't know. But that is what happened.'

'Take it easy. Mark! Do we need to tell all this to the cops?'

'No, we needn't. I tell you only because you've somehow got it stuck in your head that I was having a heavy affair with Rose Lestrangle, and you think I had something to do with her death. But you know me well enough to know I should never play an insane trick like changing those books, lover or no lover.'

'Now get this straight. Mark! I never thought you killed her!'

'Then you think Brenda did? Is that it?'

A cold tingling of the scalp, which is too - picturesquely described as

the hair standing on end, went up Mark Ruthven's nerves to his brain.

'Is that it, Toby?'

'I'm not talking,' Toby told him very quietly. ' All I'll say is this. Brenda could have murdered our Rose last night, and the reason was you.'

The cold tingling increased. Brenda had never seemed so absent as now, the house never so empty. Even Mrs. Partridge, who came in on week - days to clean and help with the cooking, was absent on Sunday.

Mark spoke gently. 'Try to think, Toby. Women don't kill other women for a reason like that. They shrink away even from accusing other women; they're too proud. And Brenda had no reason at all. Judith Walker, you say, has told the police about Rose Lestrangle's current boy - friend; she told me in confidence this morning; and you can be sure he isn't myself.'

'Do you think Rose had only one?'

'Toby, keep your head! When Judith gives a full description of this young fellow, and we learn who he is - - ' The telephone uttered a high, hoarse noise.

'Mark, what are you talking about? We already know who he is!'

'You know who he is?'

'Yes! Judith did give a full description to the cops, and it's easy!'

'Oh!'

'Handsome so - and - so, about twenty - three years old, always smiling, colour of hair between yellow and brown, teeth wide - spaced; drives a crimson - and - yellow Cadillac convertible. His old man is one of the principal trustees of the college. His name is Chadwick - Frank Chadwick.'

Another pause.

'Mark! Mark! Are you still there?'

'Yes. Yes, I'm still here.'

'And that's the thing that worries me,' raved Toby. ' This Chadwick is

mean, he never likes to see anybody get away with anything except himself. Practically every woman falls for him, and he likes to talk about it. When the cops give him the works, he'll have a lot of fun telling 'em Rose was no secluded innocent. Bang will go the whole picture Sam Kent has been building up. And this Lieutenant Henderson is nobody's fool - Mark! Haven't you got anything to say?'

'No. What is there to say?'

'Well, I agree it's not good. But we may get out of it.'

'Yes, we shall get over it. If that's all, Toby . . .?'

'Here! What's the matter with you?'

'Nothing is the matter. Thanks for the information. After I get myself another scratch meal, I'm going up to the Library: the college library, I mean. Yes, I know it's closed on Sundays; but I'm an assistant librarian and I have a key to the side door. They can find me there if they want me. Thanks again, Toby. Good - bye.'

Afterwards he stood by the telephone - table. Through the open arch into the living - room he could see the chair where Brenda had been sitting last night: in her sleeveless white dress, with the scarlet belt and red shoes, and the brown hair on her shoulders. Toby Saunders would have phrased it as, 'How dumb can you get?' Brenda had never intended to visit Jane Griffiths. She had gone to Frank Chadwick's apartment after all.

Mark snatched up the Washington telephone - directory, and leafed through the pages to the 'Cs'. Then he stopped, closed the book with a snap, and very carefully put it back on its shelf under the little table. 'Let her go!' he said aloud, and went out into the kitchen to get himself something to eat.

However, he did not eat much; nor could he later remember what it was. But it took a very long time. Having put three pipes into his coat pocket, he filled and smoked one after the other; he sat back at the kitchen table, watching the light die beyond the small - paned windows above the sink.

Presently he wandered upstairs to his study, where he sank into an easy - chair and stared at the steel filing - cabinet, containing material for the biography, until a dusky quality in the air roused him with a start.

Mark looked at his watch. Taking several documents from the filing - cabinet, he put them into a cardboard case and the case into his pocket. Then he was on his way.

Since Queen's College lay behind the avenue in which he lived, its entrance - gates were only fifty yards from the front door of his house on the right. Past the gates, he walked slowly up the long, broad curve of the gravel path.

He passed the lightless dormitories of North and South Marlborough on one side, the Administration and Webb Hall on the other. Beyond was the Lawn, vast and tree - bowered, of cropped grass in a warm, grass - scented dusk.

Mark took the path round it, towards the New Library westwards. Wings fluttered on the Lawn. The Founder's statue, carved stone on a high and heavy stone base, loomed past in dark outline. One or two scattered lights in the few occupied rooms, at Founder's or Addison or Harley, touched glimmers on green leaves; they heightened loneliness and buildings haunted by time and memories.

He should have felt memories; and yet . . .

He had graduated from Queen's College before he took his master's degree at Christ Church, Oxford. At a dance here in these grounds, held in the gymnasium, he met Brenda.

Anger he felt, and hurt; but other qualities smothered these from his mind and made him blind even to familiar scenes. Through him moved restlessness, defiance, an ache of feelings repressed, something he could not quite define.

'By God!' he muttered aloud. 'If - -'

With a heavy whirl of weights, the old clock in the cupola at Founder's banged out the first stroke of nine. By the time it had finished striking, and the vibrations trembled away amid a flutter of birds disturbed, he believed he was himself again.

A weight of silence again filled the foliage. He had left the path, crossing grass towards the north - western angle of the New Library, and the small side - door to which he had a key, when a human figure moved and darted in front of him.

'Who's there?' he called.

He was not even sure he had seen it. The path he had been taking, and from which he had turned to the left, ran on past Berkeley Hall out towards the infirmary, the tennis - courts, the football and baseball fields.

Here there seemed to be nothing: until he made out what looked like a disembodied face against the dark brick wall near the side - door.

'Who's there?' he called again.

'You startled me,' said the husky voice of Judith Walker.

'Judith! What are you doing here?'

'You startled me. Or, rather, I was startled, by something I thought I heard. And then - - ' She paused. 'I had to see you. Toby Saunders said you'd be here all evening.'

He took out a key - ring and went towards the library door. The soft grass muffled footsteps. A glimmer of neck and shoulders appeared: the black dress masked her.

'Please believe, Mark, that as a rule I never so much as go near the Lawn, even during vacations! I never did. But there's something terribly important I must tell you. May I tell you?'

'Naturally!' He found the right key on the ring; it was much larger than car or Yale keys. He unlocked the door, throwing it wide open. 'Come into the library, and I'll put on some lights.'

'Must we? Go into the library?'

'Why not?'

She moved towards him. There was still enough light in the sky to touch liquid reflections in the tall pointed windows of the New Library along its east facade; here, by the north wall, you could read only eyes.

'What I have to tell you - - '

'Yes?'

'It's about the police. They couldn't trap me into admitting it today; but I'm horribly worried about tomorrow. It's only fair not to let you be surprised, so I came here to warn you; and yet, now that I am here,

I can't do it. I can't!'

Judith faltered, and lowered her head. He was suddenly conscious, far too conscious, of her physical nearness; he seemed to feel rather than to hear her breathe. She raised her eyes to explain. The eyes opened wide, and changed expression; what he felt was caught and reflected there as thoughts moved and joined like physical forces. She seemed to shy back, and then eagerly yielded.

And then, just inside the dark doorway of the library, something fell from a height with a soft crash. The door slowly swung shut.

Judith, choking down a scream, whipped back from his arms and whirled round. But it was a second or two before she spoke.

'I knew it! I heard it! There's someone in the library.'

9

A MAN thinks himself civilized, schooled of instinct, trammelled by thought and sense. He is not.

Mark's only instinct, after that emotional wrench with Judith's body against his, was to defy this interruption and destroy it and make it cease to exist.

He took two strides forward, flinging the door wide open. It struck against wood, the side of heavy bookshelves, and rebounded. Mark walked straight into the darkness. He stood there for an instant, waiting, before he reached to the left and pressed down the top switch of five switches controlling the lights towards this end of the New Library.

Two dim electric bulbs, under green - glass top - protectors, illumined a narrow aisle stretching some distance ahead. It was one of five parallel aisles, their sides rising to some height with rows of books on either side, and heavy time - dark busts on top.

Mark glanced to the right, where the door had struck obliquely against the side of another book - wall at the back. He saw the single gap seven feet up on a shelf, and the heavy volume that lay spread - eagled face down on the floor amid dust still tingling in close - smelling air. A laugh of overstrained nerves - self - control turned it into a chuckle or a snarl - broke in his throat.

'There's nobody here,' he said. ' There never was anybody here.

Come and see!'

Judith, who had backed far away on the grass outside, did not move.

'Come and see! ' Mark insisted, with his nerves still crawling. 'It's happened enough times before this!'

Judith, pressing her hand hard over her cheeks, did not reply.

'I tell you - - ' he began in something of a roar; but quietened. 'When people reach up for a book on a fairly high shelf, without bothering to use the ladder and climb higher, they're apt to put the book back only half - way. I threw this door wide open once before now. Remember?'

'I - -'

'That overbalanced the book, but not quite enough to fall. Then a contraction of the wood, a draught from outside, anything you like, made it topple over a minute or so later. And, as the book fell, the door - look!'

He touched the door. On its oiled hinges, the ancient floorboards at their hump and slant, it began to swing shut of its own accord.

'Please believe me, Judith, there's nothing to fear.'

'Isn't there?' It was as though she had replied to some other question.

'Were you thinking, by any chance, of what Toby Saunders calls the joker of the gymnasium? Or hadn't you heard that story?'

'Heard it? Who's heard anything else?' Judith's husky voice carried almost a gasp. Her hands dropped. 'Silly pictures of the Founder's statue in luminous paint! Silly tricks to frighten a poor old man and a sixteen - year - old boy! Mrs. Hewitt and Mrs. Kent and Mrs. Mason can't talk or think about anything else.'

Impulsively Judith moved closer, but still keeping just beyond the dim glow of the electric bulbs out over the grass.

'It's done one good thing, though,' she 'They've all completely forgotten Rose Lestrangle and that young man using the infirmary as - - Oh, God what a hypocrite I am! I sound as though I blamed her.'

"Will you believe me, Judith, there's nobody here in the library?

There can't be!

'There is! I heard someone walking.'

'In the dark? I'll search the whole place if you like. Won't you come in?'

Judith seemed to debate; then hurried in, but keeping back from him. Now that they were face to face again, when eyes must meet, they could no longer avoid what had almost begun between them; and might begin once more, with all too predictable results.

'No!' said Judith, looking up steadily into his eyes. ' We can't! We mustn't! It's not right and it's not even reasonable. It's only . . . Oh, honesty for once! You can't understand what a woman may think when she can't sleep and she's not very happy.'

'And do you imagine men don't think like that either?'

'Mark! Stop!'

'Honesty for once, as you say. Do we ever understand what's at the back of our minds? A year ago, six months ago, even ten minutes ago, I thought of you as Dan Walker's wife; even thoughts went no further. All of a sudden, out there, I realized you weren't Dan Walker's wife any longer.'

'No. But you're still Brenda Ruthven's husband.'

Mark, about to speak again, looked at her for a long moment.

'Oh, you can persuade me!' said Judith, for once misunderstanding his mood. 'I don't pretend anything. It would be all too easy. But you still haven't heard what I've got to tell you.'

'Does it matter what you've got to tell me?'

'Yes!'

'Then let's hear it and decide. Meanwhile, we'll have some more lights on.'

'Mark, for heaven's sake don't! Lights here can be seen all over the Lawn and everywhere else.'

'Anyone who sees lights here at night only knows that Dr. Denhart or one of the assistants,' Dr. Denhart was the librarian, 'happens to be

working late as usual. I thought of lights because . . . well, do you still think there's someone hiding here?'

'No, I suppose I don't. Not really. And, anyway, you're here. That makes everything different. I couldn't be frightened of anything then.'

'Judith, I - - ' With a violent effort Mark checked what he meant to say. He went past her, closed the door, locked it on the inside, and dropped the key - ring back in his pocket. 'At least,' he added savagely, 'no prowler can get in now. The main doors are double - locked, and there's no other way into the library except this.'

'The stack - room! What about the stack - room?'

'There's a door into the stack - room, yes. I have a key that opens it on the rare occasions when it's locked. But the stack - room, both floors of it, has no outer door - Better let me lead the way.'

Picking up from the floor the sprawled book which (evidently) had toppled and fallen from nobody's hand, Mark replaced it. Down one dimly lighted aisle of five aisles, under stony discoloured busts on shelf - tops, he approached the great main hall.

Here, where there were echoes under a high roof, he groped towards the railed - in wooden pen enclosing the library - secretary's desk. He had touched the chain of a lamp with a green - glass shade when Judith seized his arm.

'No! Don't turn it on yet!'

'Well?'

'The police questioned me for hours today. They wanted to know whether this latest conquest of Rose's, who turned out to be a young man named - -'

'Chadwick, wasn't it? Frank Chadwick?'

'Yes! How did you know his name?'

'Toby told me, as usual. Well? Go on!'

'The police wanted to know whether he had visited her last night.' Judith's voice rose. 'I certainly hadn't seen him, so I said so. Next they asked whether anyone had visited the bungalow last night. Instead of saying that naturally I hadn't been looking out of the window all

night, which of course was true, I'm afraid I faltered before I said no. Lieutenant Henderson asked me if I hadn't hesitated. I denied it. He kept after me. I still denied it and went on denying it.'

'Yes?'

Their voices, Mark's deep and Judith's light and husky, went up in mumbled little echoes under the roof. Not loudly, but quickly.

'Well, somebody did go into the bungalow last night. At the time I thought less than nothing of it; I still think nothing of it! And yet, this morning, when I knew it was murder and not suicide - -'

'Who went into the bungalow?'

'It was your wife.'

Both of them seemed to have congealed there, beside the wooden pen. It was too dark for them to see each other's faces. Only northwards, in the aisle by which they had entered, dim illumination threw upwards the shadows of a row of busts like the shadows of decapitated heads.

'Judith, at what time was this?'

'I can't be sure! Perhaps ten minutes to midnight, perhaps a little later.'

'Brenda actually went into the bungalow?'

'I heard a car stop outside. That's why I went to the window. It was your car, with Br - - with her driving. She got out, and slammed the door, and went up the path. That street - lamp is so close you can't possibly be mistaken.'

'How long did she stay there?'

'I don't know! I tell you, at the time I paid absolutely no attention! Why should I? Any more than though I had seen Mrs. Hewitt calling on Mrs. Kent for tea. I might have been a little surprised, that's all, because I never thought she liked Rose much. Afterwards I simply forgot it.'

'You must have heard the car drive away, though?'

'If I did, it never registered. Can't you understand that? Only, this morning, I couldn't bring myself to tell you.'

A thick silence stretched out and coiled round. Mark blundered against the wooden railing, struck his fist hard on the top, and swung back to her.

'Will you forgive me, Judith, if I say I can't believe this?'

'Mark! You think I'm telling you a lie?'

'No! I don't! I trust you; I've always trusted you. You know that.'

'Yes. I know it.'

The voices grew even lower in pitch, but more intense.

'I thought Brenda needed to be protected,' Mark snapped. 'I was wrong! she doesn't need it at all. Either you were mistaken when you thought you saw her - -'

'Mark, I wasn't mistaken! Brenda's small; she has brown hair; she was dressed in white; besides, I saw her face!'

'- or else there's some other explanation. Brenda couldn't and above all wouldn't have stopped there; and I knew it as soon as Toby phoned me late this afternoon. Why in blazes should she have stopped there? She was driving too hard to reach Frank Chadwick's apartment in Washington.'

'Frak Chadwick?' Judith's incredulous words, though blurted after a pause, were hardly above a whisper. 'Not the same boy ... with Rose Lestrangle. . .?'

'The very same young Casanova. Yes.'

'You're saying he was - was - I mean, with Brenda too?'

'I'm saying nothing of the kind,' Mark retorted, though in his heart he felt it was true. 'However, if I can't trust you I can't trust anybody. All I'm saying is that Master Chadwick has been after her for some weeks.'

'But - -!'

'Last night, just before ten o'clock, Master Chadwick called for her in his car and honked the horn in the usual furtive way. Brenda was going with him. Trying to play the knowing and all - sophisticated husband, I intimated I was a bit tired of her too and in the course of the talk I mentioned Miss Lestrangle.'

'You and Rose? You said . . .?'

'No! I didn't say it. You can't force yourself to say a thing like that, even when it happens to be true; and this wasn't. I didn't mention any woman's name, but Brenda drew her own conclusions. That's why she came back.'

'Came back?'

'Wait! Listen first to what I was too dense to understand for myself. At ten o'clock Rose Lestrangle was expecting a telephone - call from somebody. I can swear to it; by accident I phoned her just after Founder's clock had struck ten. She was waiting for a call. She answered instantly; before I could speak a word she cut in eagerly with, "Is that you, darling?" While I was trying to think of an answer without saying, "No; sorry; you've got the wrong man," Toby Saunders and Caroline Kent rang at the door.'

'I - I still don't understand!'

'Just a second; you will!'

Mark sensed rather than saw or felt that Judith's shoulders had grown rigid.

'In the meantime,' he said, 'Brenda and Chadwick drove only as far as Queenshaven. Chadwick suddenly remembered a very important call he had been supposed to make at ten o'clock, and he ran into the drug - store to phone - -'

'Rose?'

'It's fairly obvious, isn't it? Chadwick couldn't be sure up to the last moment that his new flame, Brenda, would be available. So he quenched the old flame, for that night at least, with a message to Rose Lestrangle. It may or may not be ironical that Brenda chose just this time to leave him at Queenshaven and walk back home.'

'I see.' Judith's whisper was on a strained, wild note he was too overwrought to hear. 'Yes! I begin to see!'

'Whereupon - -'

'No; don't stop, Mark; go on!'

'Whereupon Miss Lestrangle herself, whom I'd only met that

morning, chose to slip into our house, without knocking or ringing, and with all the air of a femme fatale arriving for a prearranged meeting.'

'And does that surprise you so very much?' Judith cried in a whisper. 'She's done it before when . . . could she have thought you were alone there?'

'She might have, quite easily. Brenda almost made the same mistake until she heard voices. Toby and Caroline were with me; but the Venetian blinds had been drawn, and Toby's car is the same make and year as mine.'

'I see, I see, I see! And - Brenda?'

'We needn't go into that. She said she was going to Jane Griffiths's. She wasn't. She was only intent on getting to Chadwick's apartment, as quickly as possible, and paying me back in good coin.'

He had never meant to say so much, or even a tenth of it. And yet, in the eerie dark, with its sense of confidences imparted and scenes relived, he spoke before he thought. He jumped as though stung when Judith's low, fierce voice whipped back.

'Does that surprise you either, Mark?'

'I - I beg your pardon?'

'Does it surprise you she should try to pay you back? After all, you're paying her back with me'

And the sound out of the dark was less a whisper than a sob.

A mocking echo, striking Mark Ruthven to the heart, trailed round the room of what was called the New Library because it had not been completed until 1795. The architect, inspired by the then - prevailing craze for the neo - Gothic, carried it even into a new world with Gothic arches carved into gargoyles, saints, monsters.

Mark could not see them high up in the main hall. But he felt their presence, leering or grinning or sanctified, in a room stuffy, faintly musty with its weight of books. 'Judith, do you know why I told you all that?'

'No. But I wish you hadn't. Oh, God, I wish you hadn't!'

'It was because - -'

'Please don't apologize. It was my own silly fault, I'm afraid. You never showed the least ounce of interest in me until - -'

'That's not true!'

'And even now it's only because - -'

'That's not true either! I told you all those things to prove that Brenda (or Chadwick either, for that matter) couldn't have been anywhere near the Red Cottage when Rose LeStrange was killed. They were at Chadwick's apartment; let them stay there, and be damned to them; that's all I meant!'

'I don't believe it. I don't believe one word of it. But the awful, appalling thing is that I don't care. Mark . . .'

Judith, who seemed to have turned away from him, swung back again. At the same moment someone began to knock on the side - door of the library in the north wing.

The noise was magnified, of course. It was only a light, hesitant rapping with knuckles. Yet night and silence sent it clattering like an accusation into the main hall.

Judith dropped her hands and uttered a choked, half - hysterical laugh. She moved past him, leaning across the wooden enclosure towards the lamp on the library - secretary's desk. 'I told you lights could be seen in here,' she cried with a hard, bright gaiety, and laughed again. She tugged at the chain of the lamp and switched it on.

The glow that sprang up, even shielded in green glass, momentarily dazzled and blinded them. But Mark's voice quietened her instantly.

'It's nobody who can matter or nothing that can matter. If Toby knows I'm here, half a dozen people know it too. Gently!'

Shading his eyes, amid a blur of colour, he vaguely saw Judith's pale face with the dusky - red lips and the blue eyes whose pupils were contracted to pin - points by the dazzle. He also saw carved gargoyles against brown - black wood.

The knocking at the side - door began again.

He had locked that door on the inside, Mark remembered. He fished

the key - ring out of his pocket. Still shading his eyes, he could make out the door at the end of the illuminated aisle, above which the busts reared their shadows of decapitated heads.

He walked towards it without haste, though cursing under his breath.

'All right!' he called loudly. 'I'm here!' - and stopped in his tracks.

No doubt, he decided an instant afterwards, what he thought he had seen was illusion. In front of him, in the north wing, were five aisles. Each massive row of bookcases, twelve feet high, had its row of blackened plaster busts along the top. In the past he had scarcely noticed these heads, much less counted them.

And yet, as he lifted his eyes to the top of the one lighted aisle, it seemed to him that there was one head too many.

Illusion! An after - effect of sudden light!

There was no extra head up there - and it had not stealthily moved.

The cold feeling which crept round him, mounting up into his chest, occurred only because the night had turned chilly with the fall of darkness. A draught stirred under the side - door: no more.

Mark hastened to that door, unlocking and opening it. 'Mark,' began Caroline Kent's voice, 'I'm sorry to . . .' Caroline broke off. She was looking past him towards the main hall, not in any fear at all, but agitated and puzzled.

'Where's Toby?' she asked. 'Where's my father? Haven't they told you the news?'

10

'NEWS?' Mark repeated.

It was cooler outside. Caroline, wearing a light - weight coat pulled round her and a silk scarf draped over her head and tied under the chin, debated briefly before she entered.

'Father and Toby,' she said, 'left for the library two hours ago. Haven't you seen them?'

'No; but then I've been here very much less than two hours.'

'Mother's a dear, of course,' Caroline said abruptly, with strain in her dark - brown eyes. ' But she does fuss so. She says they mustn't be seen at Mike's Place in Queenshaven, or people will talk and talk if they have a glass of beer. Even this morning, when Toby dragged father out to get the newspapers, she said that was wrong too. And tonight, when they weren't back home in two hours, I was sent to bring them - - Mark!'

'Yes?'

'It's important, though.' Caroline moved her neck. ' That rather nice Lieutenant Henderson dropped in to see father after dinner. The police have made up their minds, or practically so.'

Mark straightened up. Faced with an academic problem, rather than the emotional one of Judith Walker, he found his wits clear and his beliefs taking shape.

'The police have reached a decision?' he demanded. 'I wonder if I can tell you what it is.'

'What's that?'

'They have decided Rose Lestrangle's death was suicide. They've proved for themselves, probably with scientific tests, that the bedroom was locked up inaccessibly from inside.'

'How in the world do you know that?'

'A dead man told me.'

Footsteps rapped in the main hall. Judith Walker, sturdy and composed, appeared at the other end of the lighted aisle.

Problems like this could catch and fascinate Judith as they fascinated Mark. But they had a different effect on Caroline.

Caroline, stolid and practical, with 'no nonsense' even in her clear complexion, undid the scarf from her curly fair hair and evidently resisted an impulse to stamp on the floor.

'I wish you wouldn't talk like that! I do wish people wouldn't talk like that. It's only upsetting and it's not good sense. Oh, dear! If you're going to begin about ghosts - -'

'I said nothing at all about a ghost. Go on in to the desk, Caroline. I

want to read both of you part of a letter.'

Used to the college all her life, Caroline felt no surprise at seeing Judith in the library at that time of night. She only nodded and smiled at Judith, who calmly smiled back.

Mark closed and relocked the side - door. There was nothing here, he told himself again. In the north wing, whose roof was so much lower than that of the main hall because this was the 'old' library, you found only shelves and books; and, in the west wall, another door to a modern two - storey stack - room.

If nerves still scratched at him, when he joined Caroline and Judith beside the wooden enclosure with the green lamp over a white desk - blotter, it was from another cause. He caught an unguarded look from Judith, completely unguarded.

'Father and Toby - - ' began Caroline.

'Caroline, try to forget your father and Toby!' Mark almost snapped. 'If they've gone to have a drink at Mike's Place, what difference does it make?'

'Well, I'm sorry, but I have to be sensible. That was another thing my father wanted to talk about when he saw you. He won't breathe a word; he never does; but I'm sure he thinks that poor woman's death was - well! was murder.'

'Yes, of course it was murder. But the doors are all locked here, and the real murderer can't hear us.'

If he hoped to startle both of them back into academic considerations, evidently he succeeded with Judith; but he failed with Caroline, who regarded him in bewilderment.

'Mark, have I offended you in some way by coming here?'

'No, of course not.'

'Then you needn't snap my head off. Isn't Dr. Gideon Fell arriving tomorrow afternoon?'

Mark, in the act of taking from his pocket the narrow cardboard portfolio he had brought with him, was himself the one who received the shock.

'Lord, Caroline, I'm as bad as your father! What with one thing or another, I completely forgot it: I'm not sure whether Brenda arranged for someone to come in and cook. We've got Mrs. Partridge, but we need more help when there's a guest. You see, Brenda has been called away to visit a friend of hers . . .'

'Yes, I - I know.' Caroline's face went pink, and she spoke hastily. 'But don't worry: that's partly the reason my mother sent me. She can get you someone to do the cooking. Are you meeting Dr. Fell at the airport?'

'No; he's not flying. I'm meeting the five - thirty train from New York at Union Station. Just a moment, though! My car - -'

The patient Caroline nodded.

'Yes, that's the rest of it. My father wants to drive you there to meet him. He knows Gideon Fell. . . .'

'Your father knows Dr. Fell?' Mark exclaimed. 'He never said so.'

'Well, does he ever? Do you honestly imagine he's really as absent - minded as he pretends to be?'

'Who,' Judith interrupted clearly, 'is Dr. Gideon Fell?'

'In all probability,' said Mark, 'he is as well acquainted as anybody in the world with impossible situations in general and locked rooms in particular.'

'Locked rooms, of course!' breathed Judith, instantly fascinated again. 'Now I remember! Caroline, don't you ever read mystery stories?'

Caroline drew herself up. Though she was not actually pretty, Mark thought, her vitality and her admirable figure made her seem so. Or was he becoming morbidly conscious of women's figures because he could not take his mind from Judith?

'Oh, good heavens!' he heard Caroline say. 'All this trouble on our hands, and you want to talk about - -'

'Well, dear, don't you ever read them?' Judith insisted.

'Yes, I do. But I only like what Toby calls the slop - 'em - down kind, where they're always shooting at each other or beating up the hero.'

I've tried to like the other kind, because Toby does. And I can't. When they try to prove how you can be in two places at once, or walk over sand without leaving a footprint, I don't understand it and I don't believe it. It hasn't anything to do with us."

Mark opened the portfolio and took out a folded typewritten sheet.

'This letter,' he said, 'has a very great deal to do with us.' Neither of the two women, perhaps, could have said why they were stopped in mid - argument.

There was still very little light in the main hall. Mark, without going near the green lamp, read aloud under weights of shadow.

'These "locked - up" rooms, I hereby declare, are too locked - up to be at all credible. Thus I read of the door locked, the windows nailed shut. I read of the windows not only locked, but fastened with wooden shutters; the door double - locked, and bolted as well. Private bankers, for aught I know, may inhabit a room like this. Be sure nobody else does.'

Caroline had opened her mouth to ask a question, when the next sentences struck her silent.

'Let us imagine, then, that our victim is stabbed to death, his or her hand round the knife, in an ordinary bedroom. The house is in a low - lying or damp area, so that mist can be thick there.'

Mark looked up, tapping the sheet of paper.

'The Red Cottage?' Judith cried.

'Why not - - ' asked Mark, and began to read again.

'The bedroom windows are ordinary sash - windows, locked with catches which are difficult to turn. They are also faintly rusty from damp.

'Examination by microscope (as employed in E. A. Poe's tale, The Purloined Letter) establishes that on the faintly rusty surfaces there are no traces such as must inevitably have been left by any mechanical contrivance to turn the catches from outside.

'Our key is the same. It is an ordinary key, difficult to turn in the lock, and also faintly rusty. Further examination by microscope - of the key, the door - frame, where you like - proves that no contrivance

was used to turn the key from outside.

'Yet this is murder, my friend. How?'

Though there were several more paragraphs. Mark folded the letter and held it up as finished.

'But those are the bedroom windows at Rose Lestrangle's!' said Judith, as though protesting against something.

'They are.'

'And that's the key to her bedroom door! It's not rusty in the sense of being heavily rusted; but it's discoloured, which is what your letter means; it would show marks. And it's hard to turn in the lock.'

'It is.'

'But you told me this morning - -!'

'Just a moment, Judith. Caroline, is that roughly what Lieutenant Henderson said tonight? The police made a microscopic examination like that? No pair of pliers, for instance, had been used to turn the key from outside? No possible contrivance - thread, string, pulley - mechanism, anything - had been used on either the door or the windows?'

Caroline's hands were clenched round her dark silk scarf.

'Yes, of course it was! Why shouldn't it be? Why drag in mystery stories? That woman did kill herself!'

'Oh, no, she didn't,' answered Mark.

'But the police say . . . wait! Who's been writing you letters about it? And as soon as this?'

'Nobody.'

'I mean, who wrote that letter you have there?'

'A dead man, as I told you,' replied Mark. 'This is only a copy. The original was written by William Wilkie Collins to Charles Dickens on December 14th, 1867.'

There was a straight chair near the enclosure of the library - secretary's desk. Caroline, tall and fair, sincerely not understanding

any of this, groped for the chair and sat down. Only in the eyes of Judith Walker lurked a deep glitter of excitement.

'There's your locked room,' said Mark, 'as the author of *The Moonstone* conceived it when he planned *The Dead Man's Knock*' as well. No fancy trimmings to make the story unreal or incredible. Merely an ordinary bedroom, but with windows and a door which can't be tampered with in any way.'

His low voice echoed up in the Gothic arches. He put away the letter in the portfolio and put it in his pocket.

'I see! I see now!' Judith muttered 'But . . . Mark! If Collins conceived this idea for a locked - room story in '67 - or was it '69?'

'He got the idea in '67, the same year as he got the idea for *The Moonstone*. But he didn't mean to write the second novel until '69.'

'To follow the other?'

'Yes! Now remember: early in November, '67, Dickens left England for his American reading - tour. In December Wilkie Collins wrote three letters, at different dates but forwarded in the same mail to America. He outlined the plot of the locked - room novel, deliberately holding back the solution to outrage Dickens's curiosity. And do you know where Dickens was for his own birthday, February 7th of 1868?'

Judith lifted her shoulders.

'Perhaps I ought to know, but I don't. Where was he?'

'Here in Washington. He was staying in 12th Street, at the top of Pennsylvania Avenue, nearly opposite the Treasury.'

'And that's where Dickens received the letters?' cried Judith. 'And you traced them from there eighty years later?'

'I've been lucky, that's all! But don't you see - -'

It was as though, in the heavy gloom of the library, a design was being completed, piece by piece, from a hand moving out of the past.

'- don't you see,' Mark continued, 'that the whole thing, from conceiving a brand - new idea to the manner of presenting it to Dickens, is characteristic of the man who did it?'

Judith laughed softly, in a glow which contradicted the black of

mourning.

'Mark,' she said, 'you didn't really need to tell me about Wilkie Collins. I remember reading how he acted as godfather at a christening: a little plump man, full of champagne and brandy, holding the baby and blinking through his spectacles in amazement. "The baby's drunk! Blesh my soul, the baby's drunk!"

Mark nodded.

'Or, still more characteristic, Judith, his own romantic account of how he first met his mistress: when she was fleeing away, in white robes, from pursuit by a villain who - -'

Caroline Kent sprang to her feet. Though she did not speak loudly, anger and repressed violence were in every muscle.

'Mark Ruthven, please stop this ridiculous nonsense! You're making it all up! I don't believe it!'

Mark stared at her.

'You don't believe what? That he invented a brand - new idea?'

'No, no; bother ideas! I mean . . . Oh, getting drunk at christenings! Chasing after women in white robes!'

'Caroline dear,' begged Judith, a little apologetic but with a repressed violence of her own, 'it's no use being as prudish as that, even if Toby Saunders is! What Mark understands, and you don't, is that you can't explain Victorian novels to students unless you first explain the human being who wrote them. The white robes and the romantic story may have been a myth, but the woman was real. She had the same Christian name as you. She lived with Collins for - -'

'Judith Walker, I don't believe for one minute - -!'

'You don't believe it?' blazed Judith. 'Then I'd better show you. It isn't as though this were obscure knowledge. A popular account, Kate Dickens Perugini's reminiscence to Gladys Storey, gives a picture of "dear Wilkie" and his girlfriend by someone who knew them. It's here in the library, and I'll get it.'

'Judith, are you so well acquainted with this library?' demanded Mark.

'I was Dan Walker's wife, wasn't I? The book is in the north wing, where we came from. I must put on some more lights, but I'll have it in two shakes.'

'Judith Walker - -!' Caroline was beginning again, but she spoke only to echoing, retreating footsteps.

Caroline made a gesture of despair. Pulling the lightweight coat round her, fitting the dark silk scarf over her head and tying it under her chin, she kicked back at the chair so that it toppled and fell.

'I'm going home!' she said.

'Listen, Caroline.' Mark tried to speak gently. 'No one wants to upset you about a trifling and unimportant business like Victorian morals. This locked - room idea, however, is important. Collins's letters, and his notes for his story, were in an unlocked filing - cabinet in my study. The murderer of Rose LeStrange read them, used them, reproduced them, to kill her in a way that looked like suicide.'

Caroline turned on him.

'You don't understand,' she said, her voice lifting to a cry, almost heart - rending. 'There isn't one single one of you who understands!'

'Understands what?'

'You don't know what upset me. You haven't the least notion. If you go on saying this is murder, you'll only bring a most awful thing on someone I'm very fond of. And it isn't murder! There's no murderer! Nobody has ever tried to -'

And that was where a bolt of terror struck into the library at last.

The crash they heard was like a physical blow against the head. It stunned with its weight of noise; it raided the tall Gothic windows facing east towards the Lawn; it shook the main doors, and seemed to vibrate amid the portraits and towering bookshelves towards the south in the main hall.

The echo had not ceased before Mark heard some person jump down from a height to the floor. The noise came from the north wing. Immediately afterwards Mark heard running footsteps, and he too ran like a madman towards the 'old' library.

Of five book - aisles facing him two were now illuminated instead of

one.

In the middle aisle, sideways to him and staring fixedly upwards, stood Judith Walker. She held an open book in her hands as she faced the wall of books, motionless, paralysed by shock.

Lumps and fragments of a blackened plaster bust splattered the whole aisle from broken boards where that bust had struck the floor - flung down, not dropped - within a foot of Judith's head. A gritty haze still hung in the air by the drop - lamps.

Suddenly Judith began to tremble. The book slipped out of her fingers, bumped a shelf, and fell among the fragments round her. Mark, stumbling on plaster - bits as he ran, caught her in his arms before her knees should give way.

Caroline, instantly cool in any crisis, ran after him, Judith did not faint and seemed not likely to faint; she straightened up, disengaged his arms, and began to laugh. But, when he handed her over to Caroline and plunged on after the joker in the library, she called out something inarticulate after him.

Mark's thoughts kept time to his own racing: 'The joker jumped down from the top of that bookcase. He ran for the side - door, and found it locked. Then he'd turn left towards - -'

Yes!

Mark, racing to the northerly end of the aisle, swung round it and looked to the left. There was just light enough to see the door to the stack - room softly close.

An unholy joy burnt in Mark Ruthven. The door to the modern stack - room had a Yale lock on this side only: it was set now at open position. He pulled the catch down and snapped shut the lock. Then he ran back to the middle aisle.

'Judith! Caroline!'

'I'm all right,' Judith was insisting. 'I'm all right, I tell you!'

Uneasiness took him worse than ever. 'Judith, are you sure?'

'Yes, yes, yes! Really and truly I am! Only - -'

The drop - lamp burnished Judith's light - red hair as she threw it

back from her forehead. The lips seemed darker against her pallor.

'But something looked at me. It reared up from the top and looked at me.'

'Did you see who it was?'

'No. The light was in my eyes when I looked up. And then - well, you know.'

'Mark,' Caroline intervened, 'what is it? What's on your mind?'

He looked from one to the other, from the apparently recovered Judith to the frightened but steady and resolute Caroline.

'Now don't be alarmed! But one of you must come with me. Judith, perhaps I'd better take you somewhere else. . . .'

'No!' said Judith, and seized his arm. 'We'll all go! What is it?'

The middle aisle, he noted, was in a direct line with the library - secretary's desk in the middle of the main hall. Then, taking out his key - ring and selecting a Yale key, he led them to the stack - room door.

'The joker's still here,' Mark said, and watched their faces. 'But he's trapped. He ran into the stack - room. I've shut the Yale lock on this side, and he can't get out.'

Caroline's voice was still steady. 'He can get out through the windows, can't he?'

'No. They're reinforced glass, made to open not more than five inches. He's still trapped unless he dives head - first through a window and kills himself - - Caroline!'

'Yes?'

'This key (this one!) opens the Yale lock. Take the ring, and be sure you've got the right key. Got it firmly?'

'Yes! All right! But what - -?'

'I'm going in after him. I must snap the lock shut behind me, to make sure he doesn't slip past me when I search. But I'm locked in too, so stand by to open the door when I tell you. Ready?'

For five seconds, while there seemed to be no sound inside that shell except the faint creaks and cracks of age, he hesitated with his hand on the little knob of the lock. Then Judith's fingers clawed up his left sleeve to his shoulder.

'Mark, don't do it! Phone for help! Say it's the murderer!'

'And start an alarm like that, when it may be only a tramp or a sneak - thief? I don't enjoy this myself, but I don't dare do anything else - - Judith, please step back. Ready, Caroline?'

Caroline nodded, the key in her hand.

Mark opened the door.

Instantly he reached inside, to the left, running down two lines of switches which turned on every light on the lower floor of the stack - room. A subdued but bright glow shone on steel and glass and concrete. He took a step forward into the stack - room, holding the inside knob of the door ready to close and lock. 'Mark!' Judith cried sharply, from some distance behind him.

He did not turn round, though a ripple of nerves went over him. He looked left and right, seeing as yet nothing except what should be there. No sound came from the stack - room, no rustle of anyone who might be waiting. 'Mark!'

This time the cry was so piercing that involuntarily he looked back over his shoulder.

Some dozen feet back, full in the glow from the stack - room, Judith was standing with her arms straight down at her sides. She was staring straight past him into the stack - room, her blue eyes so wide open that a ring of white showed round the iris.

This was no fancy of hers. She had seen something which gave her a worse shock even than the smashing of a missile past her head.

Those staring eyes, fixed at a point inside the stack - room, jabbed Mark like a dentist's needle under a tooth. Quickly he looked into the stack - room. But there was nothing ahead of him, so far as he could see, except a row of metal bookshelves the titles of whose books were too far away to read.

So he went forward, pulling the door shut behind him. The catch locked with a snap. He was inside now, it appeared, with the joker of

the library.

He could not see Judith's trim figure, in the black dress and nylons and black suede shoes, sway on its feet. Her eyes, with the bluish hollows of insomnia under them, rolled up. She fell senseless, collapsing from the knees with hardly a sound, beside the end of the bookcase with dark busts of Macaulay and Dickens above.

PART THREE

STRANGE WOMAN

'To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her tongue. . , .

'For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead.'

- Proverbs, II, 16 and 18.

11

BRIGHT sunshine, still clear though westering towards evening of the following day, Monday, July 19th, lay somnolent in Queenshaven.

It drowsed on the houses of frame or brick, the tower of St. Paul's Church, the cluster of stores round Hewitt Street. But no sun penetrated into the large, dusky, artificially lighted 'taproom' at the College Inn. This taproom, only part of larger premises, including small hotel and restaurant, was locally known as Mike's Place.

'I see,' said Dr. Gideon Fell.

That immense figure, assisting its massiveness on two canes, stood in the middle of the room. Mark Ruthven and Dr. Samuel Kent, over what remained of three dinners, sat at a table and watched him.

It had been less than three hours since Mark and Dr. Kent, in the latter's shaky car, had driven to Washington to meet the visitor. The heat smote them then. It winked in highlights from the stream of cars; it carved the dome of the Capitol into hard white radiance as they turned north - east towards the station.

Due to Dr. Kent's erratic driving style, they had been late in getting there. Mark, after another near - sleepless night following his adventure in the library, was already on edge.

'Why didn't you say you knew Dr. Fell?' he kept repeating to his

companion.

Samuel Kent, frowning a little, shaved the car suicidally in front of a heavy truck.

'You see,' he answered, avoiding the direct reply, 'I took a liberty. I felt sure he would be at the Players Club in New York. I telephoned him there.'

'About Miss Lestrangle's death?'

'No, no. This was some days ago. About the disturbances at the gymnasium. It was only last night I rang him about the other matter.'

'Then he knows something about it already?'

'Almost as much as I do, if that can be called a great deal. However, it is nearly a quarter to six. I only hope we haven't missed him.'

They had not missed him, even in the echoing marble vastness of the station.

'Aha!' thundered Dr. Fell, beaming and flourishing one cane.

They saw him at the news - stand, paying off an awed redcap who had carried his suitcase, and buying a box of cigars chosen mainly for its gaudy colours. His eyeglasses on the broad black ribbon were stuck askew on his nose, and his mop of hair had tumbled partway over one eye.

This was where he caught sight of his host, and waved and shouted. His red face beamed. Chuckles animated his several chins, and shook a black alpaca suit like a tent. He gripped Mark's hand with such genuine pleasure, such a vast twinkle of kindness through the lop - sided glasses, that it was like a greeting from Old King Cole. 'Fell, I imagine,' said Dr. Kent, gravely inclining his head.

'Kent, I feel sure,' thundered Dr. Fell, and happily wrung his hand. 'Gentlemen,' he continued, sobering after an address of gratitude in the stately style, 'we have much to discuss.' And he gestured hospitably towards a nearby bench. 'Shall we be seated?'

'Here at the station?' asked Mark.

'Ah, as to that! Sir,' continued Dr. Fell, with a long contemplative sniff, 'I have been meditating.'

'About the mur - -?'

'About railway stations,' declared Dr. Fell.

Since there was at least enough room sideways, he lowered himself on the bench with the balance of a cane propped at either side of him, and the gaudy cigar - box in his lap. Shaking the hair out of his eye, thrusting forward his bandit's moustache, he surveyed his surroundings.

'The coming of the railway all over England, a hundred years ago, brought dirt, smoke, squalor, and discomfort. Reactionaries will rejoice that this is unchanged; it still does. You agree, my dear Kent?'

Dr. Kent, with iron - grey hair, heavy of face and dark of eyebrows, sat down on the bench beside him.

'It used to be so, yes.'

'Sir,' continued Dr. Fell, firing up again as he addressed Mark, 'you do not realize, in this country, how you have glorified the humble railway - station. In England the grim word "station" means merely that you are stationary. Here you are bedazzled and you can find anything: except, on certain regrettable occasions, the train. I have seen Venetian palaces less impressive than some of your waiting - rooms. This station here, I believe, reproduces a Roman Bath. Oh, my hat! Unless I land next in a Versailles mirror - hall or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, I feel I have dwelt in the last kingdom of enchantment. You agree, my dear Kent?'

Dr. Kent frowned.

'I have not your flights of fancy,' he retorted, fussed and a little testy. 'Besides, you have been in America before. These disquisitions are not necessary.'

Dr. Fell rolled round his massive head.

'Sir,' he said in a different voice, 'I stand rebuked.'

'It was only - -!'

'But you have not allowed,' said Dr. Fell, 'for my natural embarrassment. I was to come to Queen's College as a guest of Mark Ruthven, to look at some lost letters of Wilkie Collins. Meanwhile you phone me about a wild situation here, and still urge me to come at

any cost.'

'I phoned you mainly because Dr. Arnold Hewitt insisted.'

'Oh, ah! And Mark did not put me off. Like most people here, particularly Southerners, he would rather cut his throat than fail to show hospitality, even when the time is infernally inconvenient. I understand this. But, by thunder, I feel no less discomfort! Sir, what do you want of me?'

'The fact is - ' Dr. Kent began.

'What do you want of me?' insisted Dr. Fell. 'I am a foreigner in a distant land. I could not possibly appeal to the police - -'

'Tut, there's no question of that.' Dr. Kent made a slight gesture. 'After the autopsy this morning, the inquest will be a mere formality. Officially, the case is closed.'

'Then what do you want of me? In the unlikely event that I could find the truth, what is to be the result? Do you want this murderer turned over to the law?'

Dr. Kent spoke abruptly. 'Fell, I don't know!'

'Oh, ah!'

'One moment! I have done a lot of hard swearing to save the college from scandal. And yet, in simple justice, I feel we ought to learn the truth. I am sure only of what I don't know, though I do know one fact which may surprise everyone.'

Mark Ruthven cleared his throat and intervened.

'Yes!' Mark said, trying to control jumpy nerves. 'Yes, that's the point - - Dr. Fell?'

'Oh, ah? Harrumph? Hey?'

'You're not inconveniencing me,' Mark told him sincerely. 'And I'm a New Englander, though I was brought up in the South. We all want to learn the truth; that is, if Dr. Kent himself will do a little plain speaking.'

Samuel Kent looked up, the wrinkled eyelids moving over his vivid dark - brown eyes.

'Mark, Mark, Mark! You talk of plain speaking?'

'Yes! I do!'

'Then forgive what I say. Why did Brenda really leave you on Saturday night? Is it true, as Mrs. Hewitt now whispers, that she has - has gone to young Frank Chadwick? Above all, what happened in the New Library last night?'

A distant loud - speaker began to talk hollowly. Through the station shuffled endless crowds, under rows of statues set high up against arched windows.

Mark kept a tight grip on his nerves.

'As for Brenda,' he said, 'I can't (or won't, if you prefer) tell you anything until I find her or she finds me. I've phoned several friends; I can't risk phoning too much in case the police get curious. As for Chadwick, I don't know; you'd better ask him instead.

'But I can easily tell you about what happened in the library; I imagined you already knew. And I can tell you about a locked - room murder planned on paper by a dead man. . . .'

'Hey?' thunderously interposed Dr. Fell.

'- and carefully executed in Rose Lestrangle's bedroom by somebody who's got to be in our midst.'

Mark strode over towards Dr. Fell's suit - case, picked it up, and returned.

'Dr. Fell,' he added, 'the car's outside. Your room is ready at my house, and we're having dinner at Mike's Place on the way. I am asking for investigation, fair play and no indulgence, because I'm certain Brenda had nothing to do with this. If I tell you everything I dare tell you, will you give us your best help?'

For a moment Dr. Fell did not reply.

He sat wheezing heavily, his chins sunk into his collar, a 'hand on the crutch - head of each cane. His narrow little eyes, high above the lopsided eyeglasses, once strayed round towards Dr. Kent as though in disquiet or even apprehension.

Then, thrusting the gaudy cigar - box into a side - pocket big enough

to swallow it, he propelled himself to his feet. His face was fiery with earnestness.

'Sir,' he intoned, 'I am entirely your servant. If an old duffer with a scatter - brain can be of assistance, you may command me. It is even possible - by thunder, yes! - that I have an idea of my own in the matter.'

That was how, at past seven in the evening, they were having dinner in the large, dusky, artificially lighted 'taproom' of the College Inn at Queenshaven. They sat at a side table, over steamed clams and lobster, while Mark told his story. And, though he could eat very little, he found the atmosphere soothing.

Round the walls of the taproom, indirectly illuminated, ran a series of panels painted by a celebrated picture - book artist of the early twentieth century. Done in strong colour and careful detail, they showed battle - scenes through American history from the French - and - Indian War to the War between the states.

Against these panels the imitation tavern - furniture stood out dark and heavy. Air - conditioned coolness smelled pleasantly like a wine - vault. Except for a waiter, they were alone.

Beginning with Judith Walker's mention of Wilkie Collins on Sunday morning, Mark told them the details; all the details relating to Wilkie Collins, Armadale, the substituted copy of The Woman in White, and the proposed locked room. He read the letter to Dickens, dated in December of 1867.

Only at one point did Dr. Fell interrupt him.

'Oh, Lord! Oh, Bacchus!' he muttered from the gloom. He blinked at Dr. Kent. 'Is all this true?'

'True? True? My dear Fell, am I in a position to say? It is Mark's story.'

'No, no no! Archons of Athens! You mistake my meaning. Did the police carry out tests on the key, the door, the doorframe in Miss LeStrange's bedroom?'

'Yes.'

'The windows, the window - locks, and so on?'

'Yes.'

'Had anything been tampered with?'

'Nothing. The lady was most thoroughly locked in when she died.'

Dr. Fell's mouth had been growing rounder with more than food and drink.

'Now tell me,' he said to Mark. 'When you discussed the matter with Mrs. Walker on Sunday morning, you informed her you could see how "three - quarters" of the device might have been worked. Frankly, sir, I do not follow that. In my experience, either we see the whole trick or we see none of it.'

'Dr. Fell,' said Mark, 'I don't think you understood what I meant. I was telling Judith Walker I knew three - quarters of the facts in the projected novel, all Collins revealed to Dickens, and that the police might think I had worked out the secret from the clues. But I haven't. For instance . . .'

'Yes?' -

'Well, in The Dead Man's Knock, one of the characters was to swear he heard someone using a file on bars during the night of the murder - '

'Using a file on bars?'

'Yes. But there aren't any bars on the windows of the locked room. In Collins' notes, which are very brief and which I've got at home, that's marked as important evidence. And yet I can't even see what it has to do with the story.'

'Harrumph! Hah! To how many people have you told all this?'

'I haven't told all of it to anyone except the late Dr. Dan Walker. Brenda knows, of course; I've mentioned it to Toby Saunders, to Dr. Hewitt, and I thought I'd told a fair amount to Dr. Kent here. But Dr. Kent says I haven't.'

'One last important question, then,' urged Dr. Fell, 'while I groan and brood and tear my hair in silence. What does your wife look like?'

Mark, taken off balance, blinked at him.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sir, please describe your wife! I am not asking you to tell us where she went or any domestic details. Merely describe her appearance, will you?'

And Dr. Fell listened closely while Mark did so.

'Good! Now, - then! About nine o'clock last night, you say, you went to the New Library to study the Wilkie Collins letter: the one you have read us, the one dealing with the mechanism of the room rather than the other two about the characters and story. At the side - door you met Mrs. Judith Walker. And then? What happened?'

Mark told them.

He suppressed Judith's story of seeing Brenda in front of the Red Cottage at ten minutes to twelve, or a little later, on the night of the murder. Also, wondering what insanity had been on him, he suppressed all mention of his near - amorous encounter with Judith.

Otherwise he told every fact. And, as he did so, the nightmare crept back over him. Again, in memory, he heard the plaster bust crash and explode on the floor. The joker, apparently, was trapped in the stack - room. Again he opened the stack - room door, glanced behind him, saw Judith's terror - stricken eyes with the rings of white round the iris...

'Yes?' thundered Dr. Fell, making Mark jump. 'I quite understand so far. Mrs. Walker had fainted, but you did not know this at the time. You closed the stack - room door and locked yourself in. What happened then?'

Mark regarded him with full - blown bitterness.

'Nothing,' he replied.

'Nothing?'

'I mean,' Mark explained, 'there was nobody in the stack - room. Nobody on either floor. The joker had disappeared.'

Dr. Fell's face, with napkin stuck into the collar and a gleam on the lopsided eyeglasses, seemed slowly levitated beyond the table. His knife and fork, held bolt upright, also caught gleams in the semi - dark.

'No,' Mark corrected hastily, 'I don't mean the joker was a ghost or

this is another locked room. What happened, for my money, was far simpler and far more infuriating.'

'And what was that?'

'I was fooled by one of the oldest tricks in fiction. The joker was never in the stack - room at all.'

Here Mark turned to Dr. Samuel Kent.

'I was standing beyond the middle aisle of five aisles: facing north, but turning to the left towards the stack - room door in the west wall. Right! If you're in that position you can't quite see all the vertical line of the door. The bookshelves hide about two inches on the same side as the lock. You've noticed that?'

'I dare say, I dare say! But exactly how - -?'

'Well, the joker couldn't, have got away by running. And so he out - manoeuvred me. He stood to the left of the door, out of sight, and closed it with his finger - tips. That's what I saw. When I decided he had gone into the stack - room, he tiptoed away.'

'Were there traces of him?'

'Yes! On top of two bookcases where he'd hidden. Still, without dragging in the police, I could hardly get fingerprints. In the south wing, much later, I found an unlocked window with a broken catch over a hundred years old; that's how the joker got in.'

'My dear Mark,' said Dr. Kent, with ruffled forehead and a mild anger twitching his dark eyebrows, 'all this is unimportant. What did Mrs. Walker see in the stack - room? What could she have seen? What frightened her so much? That's what I want to know.'

'So do I! So do all of us! I - -'

Mark stopped.

He had too strong a memory of Judith's apparent recovery from that faint. She could manage to walk, but she was incoherent and she needed help. He assisted her down past the Lawn; near North Marlborough she collapsed. With pity, with guilty realization that Judith could no more have been herself that evening than he had been himself, he carried her to her house in Harley Lane while Caroline phoned for the doctor.

It was edged with a sharp reminder of Brenda, too.

'Judith was still under sedation this afternoon,' Mark said. 'Mrs. Kent and Caroline stayed with her last night. I stayed too so that - - ' Again he stopped. 'But you must know all this, don't you? Surely Mrs. Kent or Caroline told you?'

'They are still with her,' Dr. Kent pointed out. 'Their messages

have not been very clear, you know.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'I am very fond of Mrs. Walker; very fond! A shock, yes. But what kind of shock?'

'That's the trouble. There was nothing she could have seen straight in front of her except metal shelves full of books on archaeology. Unless we can get some kind of suggestion from ... Dr. Fell!'

'Hey?'

'Have you been following this at all?'

'Sir,' intoned Dr. Fell, drawing the napkin from his collar and sitting up in dignity, 'let me assure you I have been listening with far closer attention than my admittedly cross - eyed and half - witted appearance would seem to indicate. As proof of this, may I ask two questions?'

'Of course.'

Dr. Fell hoisted himself to his feet. Wheezing, he lumbered to the middle of the room, with the dusky bright war - scenes painted behind him.

'Are you sure,' he asked, 'that this so - called "joker" of the library was not in actual fact the casual tramp or sneak - thief you half imagined he might be at the time?'

'No; how can I be sure? That's why I didn't dare raise an alarm. And yet he's got to be the joker we're after, or there's no pattern in all this and - it makes no sense. What is your second question?'

Dr. Fell, scowling, pursed up his mouth.

'Mrs. Judith Walker and Miss Kent. What do they look like?'

Mark began to protest, but Dr. Fell's face was so deadly serious that he answered the question in detail.

'You don't think,' Mark demanded, 'Rose Lestrange was killed by a woman?'

'No. At the moment I can think of nothing more unlikely. But, by thunder! It is fitting that this crime should have occurred at or near a college of age and tradition and acute intelligence. Whoever locked up that bedroom was an academic type, subtle in the ways of books.'

'Then why should it matter what three women look like?'

'Four women!' Dr. Fell corrected instantly. 'Four women! And I beg you not to forget it.'

'Very well; but can the appearance of four women have any importance in this?'

'Yes! I was thinking, actually, of what seems to me the most grisly and disturbing part of the affair. I mean the disturbances at the gymnasium. I mean the true joker, who laughs in corners and draws pictures of the Founder's statue in luminous paint and pushes a sixteen - year - old boy into a swimming - pool.'

Dr. Fell, wheezing heavily, lifted one cane.

'But observe!' he added. 'That was terrifying, in its own way. And yet it was far from being subtle. On the contrary! It was crude, rather schoolboyish, almost as though - -'

His big voice trailed away, leaving his mouth open. Lowering the cane, supporting his bulk on both, he raised his chin as though watching something in a corner. His shaggy head was dark in silhouette against a scene from the Ambush of Braddock's Army, the green of the Virginia Militia protecting scarlet uniforms from Indian arrows.

'I see,' said Dr. Fell. Then he roused himself, as though afraid

he had said too much.

Mark rose to his feet, nearly upsetting the beer as his elbow.

'Is it too much to ask what you see? According to the first evidence, the joker at the gym must have been Rose Lestrangle herself!'

'I fear I deny that!' struck in Samuel Kent.

Mark controlled himself.

'In any event,' he said, 'this can't concern Brenda. Brenda, of all people, had no concern with what happened in the gym. Brenda . . . yes, yes, what is it?'

The taproom waiter, a small man with the manner of a Balkan diplomat, had scurried in to gather up the plates before bringing coffee. He addressed Mark in a heavy undertone.

'Mr. Ruthven! There's a man outside, Mr. Ruthven, who wants to see you. You'd better go out and see him.'

'Thank you, but I'm rather busy at the moment.'

'You'd better go out and see him, sir.'

'Why? Can't he come in here?'

'He says he doesn't choose to come in, sir. You'd better see him. It's Mr. Frank Chadwick. He says he has a message from your wife.'

12

THE crimson - and - yellow Cadillac convertible, with Frank Chadwick at the wheel, was parked across the road just outside Barney's Drug - Store.

Mark, after the dizzy sensation of emerging from air - conditioning and semi - darkness into heat and sunshine, straightened up. Across Hewitt Street the two looked at each

other.

Mark walked slowly across the road to the car. At first glance Frank Chadwick seemed his usual cool, smiling, confident self, with much boyish charm of which he was well aware. His thick hair, of brown with blond tinges, surmounted a handsome face and a loose - limbed figure. Wearing a cream - coloured suit and a rather conspicuous tie, he tapped his finger - tips lightly on the button of the horn without sounding it. Otherwise he did not move.

Mark approached the car and said nothing. Again they surveyed each other.

'Hello, Ruthven,' the young man said lightly. He spoke with much charm, though allowing his smile to die away, and seemed to reflect. 'First of all,' he added, 'I don't want you to get me wrong.'

'It would be too bad if I did, Mr. Chadwick.'

Inside the drug - store, a cash - register rang faintly. Frank's eyelids drooped a little. His finger - tips rose once, twice, on the button of the horn. But he smiled again. 'It might, and it might not. That'd be up to you.' Then his voice grew persuasive. 'Look, old man: do you mind if I get slightly personal?'

'You are too old to change now, Mr. Chadwick.'

This alert - eyed youngster was very far from being a fool, as Mark knew well in spite of what he had said about Frank.

'Watch it, Ruthven,' he advised quite pleasantly. 'I'm here to do you a favour. I'd hoped you would appreciate it.'

'Yes?'

That monosyllable spurred only a pause. All of a sudden, for no discernible reason, Frank's cool self - assurance cracked across; something intensely human appeared there.

'Listen, Ruthven!' he burst out. 'You're not a bad sort, in your way. I - -' He stopped.

And then Mark understood, and grew less tense. For the first time a pampered young man had come face to face with life as it actually is, and had got a bad fright. Mark had seen one or two such young men before.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'Have the police been scaring you?'

'The police? Think I give a damn about the police? No! It's my father!' Frank made a gesture, but he was embarked now and he plunged away. 'As I say, Ruthven, you're not a bad sort. But do you know what's the matter with you, both you and Brenda? You're proud, both of you. You're so damn proud that . . . Listen! Do you know where Brenda's been all this time? Wait! Don't say anything yet!'

'I hadn't intended to say anything yet.'

Frank sat back and looked at him.

'Jesus! You're not making this easy.'

'Why should I?'

All the same, as he thought he saw something of Frank's real nature, Mark's rage and jealousy had grown less. Frank burst out again.

'She hasn't been with me, I can tell you. She's been at the Willard since Saturday night. You can check on that if you don't believe me.'

'How do you know she has been there, Mr. Chadwick? "

'Because this is 1948. Because you can't get a room in a decent hotel for love or money, unless you've got the connections or the know - how. What's wrong with you, Ruthven? Brenda stood me up! She stood me up right outside this drug - store!'

Mark said nothing.

'She stood me up and went home. When she ran away from you again and went to the Willard, because you drove her away, she called up from the Willard and asked me to fix it with the management and get her a room there. Some people might have thought that was nerve, after she'd stood me up. But I did.'

'Do you remember what time this was?'

'Time?'

'Yes. The police are investigating the suicide of Rose Lestrangle, which might turn out to be a murder connected with Queen's College. You phoned Miss Lestrangle at shortly past ten o'clock on Saturday night, from that same drug - store behind you.'

Frank Chadwick brushed the back of his hand across his forehead.

The word 'police' did not affect him, Mark could have sworn. Nor did 'Rose Lestrangle'. But two other words altered his mouth and eyes still more.

'Queen's College! ' he breathed. 'My old man thinks that place is sacred. Well, I've had my lesson. Leaving Brenda out of this (and you can!), I swear I'll never lay hands on any more faculty women as long as I - -' He stopped dead.

'You mean Brenda isn't the only wife of a faculty - member who's interested you?'

No reply.

Mark's question hit him hard as he paused. He had almost said too much, and he knew it. But the jolt of what he had nearly spoken had the opposite effect: it pulled Frank together and restored his coolness.

'That may be, or it may not be. Whose business is it?'

'Yours. And hers too, if you think of her.'

Frank laughed.

'I don't, thanks,' he said, with a tinge of cruelty in the wide-spaced upper teeth even as his smile and his charm returned in poise. 'I've obliged for the last time.'

'Some day, possibly, you will.'

'Meaning what, old man? I'd die in a good cause if I did. Seriously, now - -!'

'Yes?'

'I've done the square thing, haven't I?' Frank asked, with real seriousness. 'I've told you the truth about Brenda, I came here to do it. She's got you on the brain; she just can't see anybody else. Well! ' He laughed. ' Every man's bound to have a failure now and then.'

'That's one way of looking at it, I suppose.'

'It's the only way of looking at it. Glad there are no hard feelings. And that's all there is to my affairs in Queenshaven.'

'What about Rose Lestrangle?'

Frank had stretched like a cat. He reached out lazily, turned the ignition key, and pressed the starter - button. He was settling back to the hum of the car when Mark spoke. At this he whipped round again.

'That - - ' began Frank. An unfathomable expression, like one of raw and scratched vanity, shone in his narrowed eyes. It vanished in an instant.

'Too bad about her, old man,' he said coolly. 'Whatever there may have been between us, though, it doesn't concern the

college. My father may not like it; I'm sorry to say he doesn't; but he won't cut my allowance and he won't kick me out. Lucky, eh?'

'For whom? Miss Lestrangle?'

'Watch it, Ruthven. Never pays to be funny. As I was saying, the police were at me about it yesterday. Where was I between one a.m. and three a.m. on Sunday? Answer: I was at my apartment. Could I prove I was there, and not breaking Rose's heart and making her stab herself for love? I'm glad to say I could.'

'How?'

'We - el!' The wide - set teeth were deprecating. 'Brenda stood me up, didn't she? What would you have done? What would any man have done? Called another girl and issued my kindest invitations. We don't mention names; but the police are satisfied. Anything more I can tell you?'

'Yes. What time did Brenda phone you from the Willard?'

'Why? Brenda isn't in any trouble, is she?'

'No, but - -'

'You hesitated, didn't you?' smiled Frank.

'Yes, I hesitated. I'm interested in Brenda and nobody else. What time did she phone you from the Willard?'

'Never mind, old man! Always glad to be of service. It must have been about ten minutes to one. I had to call 'em back to get the reservation, and she didn't get to her room until nearly two o'clock. Anything more I can tell you?'

'No,' answered Mark. His tone altered. 'Now clear out of here.'

'What did you say?'

'I said: clear out of here.'

Frank Chadwick fixed his gaze on the other man. The fingers of his left hand tapped lightly on the top of the car door, and tapped again, as his right - hand fingers had tapped on the horn - button.

'That wasn't very wise of you, Ruthven. You're not as young as you used to be, and you shouldn't take foolish chances. Now what if I got out of this car and taught you a thing or two?'

Mark leaned forward and pulled down the handle of the car door. The broad door swung wide open.

Mark waited.

The engine purred softly. A cash - register rang again inside the drug - store. Frank sat on the edge of nothingness, elbow and arm in the air. He seemed to sit there for ever. Astonishment, incredulity, rage, perhaps other emotions as well, slowly showed in his face.

Frank reached out, grabbed the door, and slammed it shut. The car shot forward with such acceleration that its tiger - growl deepened into a roar as it rocketed down Hewitt Street towards Alexandria.

Mark, with the blood still beating in his temples, watched it go.

He stood in the road in front of Barney's, a modern drugstore with wide and polished plate - glass windows on either side of a closed glass door instead of a screen - door because of the air - conditioning.

The glass door should have closed, on its mechanism, each time a customer went in or out. It was partly open now. If so, it was being held open. Mark looked up.

Brenda herself was standing behind the glass, looking out at him.

'You're proud, both of you. You're so damn proud. . . .' And again:

'When she ran away from you again and went to the Willard, because you drove her away. . . .'

In Brenda's eyes he saw fright, irresolution. She returned his gaze only for an instant. Turning quickly to the left, inside the plate - glass window, she hurried towards a tall rack of bright - coloured magazines and began to exhibit absorbed interest in them.

Mark glanced round. The large and amiable figures of Dr. and Mrs. Luther Mason were approaching along Hewitt Street, bound for dinner at the restaurant (not the taproom) of the College Inn.

Mark ran into the drug - store, stopping just inside. The glass door closed with a soft whush.

It was very quiet here. A lanky youth in a sweat - shirt, at the soda - counter, consumed a frosted chocolate through a straw. An elderly lady, unknown to Mark, softly argued about some prescription with the pharmacist at the back.

At the magazine - rack, her back still turned, stood Brenda.

Mark went over and stood so close beside her that their arms touched. She wore the same sleeveless white dress - no, it was another one; there was something different about it! It had a blue belt and she was wearing blue - and - white shoes. Even Brenda's shoulders quivered with passionate absorption as she bent forward to study the cover of Look.

Silence.

Time stretched out interminably before she spoke in a quick whisper, still studying Look.

'I only came back because of the awful things happening here, and that woman being killed, and you involved in it! And

because we have a guest! That's all!

Another aching silence. Brenda risked a sideways glance, hesitant, of the grey dark - lashed eyes.

'I only - Mark,' she burst out, 'I've been such an awful fool.'

'Not nearly as much as I've been.'

'But I have!'

'You haven't!'

'I have!'

The necessity of crying out in whispers, of studiously examining all the magazines in this place flavoured with scented soap and fruit sundaes, put them into one of those situations which only afterwards seem incongruous. 'Brenda, I love you.'

'Well, I love you.'

'We can't talk here. Can't we get out?'

'Yes - -! No! Dr. and Mrs. Mason are just going by. They'd ask me why I've been away.'

'Well, what difference does it make - -? Wait a minute! Did you drive back here with him?'

'With who - -? Oh, God, no! I don't even know why he was here! I drove back in our car, and saw the Cadillac following. And he stopped outside here, and I stopped on up the road, and . . .'

'Don't worry! It doesn't matter!'

'It does matter! He talked to the waiter at Mike's Place, and you came out. Mark, I'm sorry: I sneaked in through the side door, the one through the dispensary. And I listened. I love you.'

'The street's clear now. Dr. and Mrs. Mason have gone into the restaurant. Can't we get out now?'

'Yes - -! Mark, who killed her?'

The lanky youth in the sweat - shirt finished his frosted chocolate, the straw making a rude noise in the empty glass. But, as Mark looked down into Brenda's face, all sense of the absurd or the incongruous was wiped away in sudden fear.

'Brenda, have you just driven back here?'

'Yes. Why?'

'You talked to someone at the college or hereabouts?'

'No; not a soul. But I read all the papers this morning, and I was scared to death.'

'There wasn't a word in the papers about murder. Dr. Kent and Judith Walker made her out to be such an innocent, respectable character that it was a dud story. There have been very few reporters after us. How did you know it was murder?'

Brenda's mouth opened.

'But . . . but I never imagined it could be anything else! Besides, I heard - -' She started to say something, changed her mind. 'I mean, when you read that kind of thing in the papers, you never believe what you read is all the truth. You always think they're holding something back. Isn't that so?'

A cash register rang. The lanky youth, having paid for his frosted chocolate, sauntered out. As though inspired, another register sounded faintly at the back; the elderly lady, who evidently had been here for some time buying articles one at a time, scuttled out after him.

Footsteps behind the soda - counter retreated in the other direction to silence.

'Brenda, there's one question I've got to ask you. When you drove into town on Saturday night, did you stop and go into Rose LeStrange's bungalow. Did you?'

Brenda retreated a little, her eyes becoming fixed. A flush rose in her face.

'No, I didn't! I thought of doing it, but I didn't. If you're thinking about what I said . . .'

'Never mind what you said. Did you even stop there? Did you get out of the car?' He saw her uncertainty. 'It doesn't matter in the least what you did. Just tell me the truth.'

'All right!' she flung back in a defensive whisper. 'I did stop. I did get out of the car. I - I can't hide anything, can I? But I knew I'd be ashamed of myself for ever and ever if I said one word to her. I only took a step or two up the path before I climbed back into the car and tore away.'

'At what time was this?'

'Mark, I don't remember.' Then the wide - set eyes, which gave an illusion of high cheek - bones, searched and caught memory. 'Wait, though, I do. The clock at Founder's was just striking midnight when I heard - well! when I heard it strike.'

Mark inwardly exulted. This agreed entirely with the testimony of Judith Walker and with other evidence which made his heart sing. Perhaps Brenda misread his look of relief.

'I'm telling you the truth. Please, please forgot the things I said that night, when I didn't mean any of them.'

'I know you're telling the truth. There's no need to back over . . . over . . .'

She cried out at him.

'Yes, Mark, there is. I've got a question for you too.'

'A question?'

'Yes! In the past year or so, haven't you been happy with me?'

Outside the light had begun to change; the sun was sinking at that hushed turn when the sky clouds in a faint shadow of dusk. He stared at her, recognizing the same flush and brightness and uncertainty he had seen about her in his study on Saturday night.

'Brenda, what in the name of sense do you mean?'

'If you haven't been happy, tell me. I'll understand. Only tell me; that's what I want to know. That's why I tried to make you jealous of Frank.'

Mark opened his mouth, and shut it again.

'It isn't easy to say this. Mark, but I've got to. I told you several women (well, Judith Walker, anyway!) wanted to go after you. Three years ago or even two, if that kind of thing happened, I just laughed to myself; I thought: "He doesn't know she's there; he doesn't even notice her!" But later I began thinking, "He doesn't notice me either; he just doesn't care."'

'Brenda! Listen - - !'

'Oh, I was attracted to Frank! I thought of having an affair with him! But I never cared anything about him. What I said in your study, about wanting to divorce you and marry Frank, was all lies invented on the spur of the moment. Because it hurt so much when you said you didn't care.'

'Then I was a damned prize idiot trying to hurt you. And you - -?'

'Yes. So I left Frank here at the drug - store and walked back home. But I was wondering about Rose Lestrangle, thinking she would be far worse than Judith Walker, and then she slipped into the house like you - know - what.'

'Brenda, I told you there was nothing - - !'

'Well, I didn't believe it. When I left in the car I really did mean to go to Jane Griffiths', only I was in such a state I couldn't face anybody. I went to the Willard Hotel. Mark, it was only later I knew you hadn't been carrying on with her at all.'

'You knew? When? This morning?'

'No. I knew less than half an hour ago, standing in this drug - store, when I saw you handle Frank as I hoped you'd handle him when I was trying to make you jealous.'

Brenda raised her head. Her eyes brimmed over.

'If you could have seen your own face when you wouldn't even bother to answer him, but just pulled open the car door and dared him to get out! If you haven't been happy with me, Mark, please tell me. But if you have been . . . well, you might tell me that too.'

He told her.

Taking her firmly by the arm, he guided her outside into a deserted street. Under a tree, amid gathering shadows, he told her in some detail.

And yet the necessity for keeping up public decorum, for standing well apart and pretending they were discussing the the weather, kept these two in a state of nerves it is not necessary to describe.

Mark took refuge in explaining to her exactly how innocent she was of any concern in the murder of Rose LeStrange. This seemed to daze Brenda, but she accepted it eagerly.

'Let's have it straight,' he insisted. 'The outside limits for the time of death, one side or the other, are twelve - thirty at the earliest and three - thirty at the latest. Nobody on earth could drive from Rose's house to the Willard Hotel on Pennsylvania

Avenue between twelve - thirty and ten minutes to one.'

'No; but - -!'

'Wait! You were at the Willard at ten minutes to one? And didn't get to your room until nearly two? There must be witnesses to that?'

'Yes, of course. But - -!'

'Where did you leave the car?'

'Where I always do. At Hilary's Garage, just around the corner.'

'I thought so! Even if you could have left the hotel unnoticed, you couldn't possibly have got the car out of that garage without being seen. Whenever they say the crime occurred, you're as safe as government bonds.'

'Mark!' she said in horror. 'Did anybody ever think I ... I . . .?'

'Only Toby Saunders, and he doesn't count.'

'Toby Saunders?'

'My dear, you know Toby. He flies to extremes and makes some wild accusation; then he's conscience - stricken and tries to make it up. He's done it over and over again. He could never really have believed that.'

'But what do you want me to do?' Brenda moistened her lips. 'You don't want me to tell the police?'

'No; that's not necessary. Just tell Dr. Fell. You never gave two hoots for Frank Chadwick! You were at the Willard Saturday night and last night! You've got an alibi like the Treasury! Tell Dr. Fell!'

Despite himself his voice had grown louder; he checked himself. But it was Brenda's sixth sense which made her stiffen and turn round.

Dr. Fell himself, shaggy head bare, stood in the middle of the street with the red - brick, white - windowed premises of the College Inn behind him. Mark suddenly noticed that Dr. Samuel Kent's car was gone from in front of the inn; he could not remember having seen it go.

Several times in this affair a bell of danger had sounded in his mind. He heard it again when he saw the newcomer's face.

Dr. Fell cleared his throat.

'Ma'am,' he said to Brenda, with vast and concertina - like distress, 'I am Gideon Fell. Will you forgive my intrusion if I swear your photographs are only pale shadows of the dazzling reality? And you, sir! Will you forgive me if I tell you that you have correctly read my dial? Rose Lestrangle is still with us. There will be more trouble, and perhaps this night.'

'Rose Lestrangle? How?'

'Just before Sam Kent was called away by his wife, as usual, he made a disclosure. I had anticipated it; he mentioned the matter, in guarded fashion, by phone. But it takes some assimilating; and, even then, it is not the biggest of our worries.'

'I don't quite understand.'

'No, by thunder! Yet I must have a few words with Mrs. Walker, if her physician will allow it. Before that I must visit the bedroom at Red Cottage, the centre of our curious lady's lair, with someone who discovered her dead body. Even at a time like this, sir, I hope you will visit it too.'

Brenda shivered, as though a spider had walked across her flesh. But she straightened up, shook back her hair, and linked her arm through Mark's.

'Of course you must go! Mark, dear, may I go with you?'

IN the centre of Rose Lestrangle's bedroom, as twilight began to smudge the sky, Dr. Fell stood motionless, studying the dressing - table with the triple mirrors.

A dumb devil seemed to possess all three persons now in the house. Hardly half a dozen words had been spoken since they entered.

Mark stood in the little white - painted passage, looking alternately through the open doorway of the bedroom where Dr. Fell pondered, and across the passage through the open doorway of the drawing - room where Brenda did not so much wait as lurk.

At the last moment, as Mark had foreseen, Brenda would not venture into the bedroom. She shied back. Why she had wanted to come here at all, except from a kind of repelled fascination, he could not imagine.

She would sit down on a Chippendale chair in the drawing - room, with its silver and its long table which could be used as a dining - table. Then Brenda would jump up again, and move between the table and a fine Chippendale writing - desk.

They had found no difficulty about getting in; the front door was unlocked. It now stood wide open, as it had stood when Mark, Toby and Dr. Kent entered through the mist of Sunday morning.

Since the cottage faced north - east, there was very little light left in the sky outside the open front door. But the dim amber lamp was burning again on its little table at the rear of the hall. Goya's black - and - white framed drawing of the Witches' Sabbath glimmered on the wall.

Still nobody spoke.

Dr. Fell, contemplating the dressing - table and the padded green dressing - table stool on which Rose Lestrangle's dead body had been wedged with knees and thighs under the shelf, seemed to have turned to stone.

'Let's see, now!' Mark was thinking. 'The architecture of this house?'

Originally, he remembered, there had been only two rooms: those which were now the drawing - room and the bedroom. In 1920 or thereabouts, someone had told him, a small modern bathroom and a kitchenette were built on at the back of the bedroom. In the same way a narrow breakfast - room was added at the rear of the drawing - room, both kitchenette and breakfast - room having doors opening into the hall.

That was all.

'Red Cottage.' The Bungalow.' Queenshaven 13.'

Twenty - odd feet outside the open door, at the end of the path, the street - lamp flashed into life with the effect of a conjuring - trick. It threw its diffused radiance for many yards. Mark's Chevrolet, with Brenda's suit - case and Dr. Fell's suitcase as well, stood just outside.

He hesitated, made up his mind, and stalked towards the bedroom.

'Mark! ' Brenda called.

Even the effect of a human voice, after that silence, put him on edge. Brenda stood in the doorway behind him, tense and alert.

'Where are you going?' she asked.

'Only into the bedroom here. I've got an infernal ghoulis curiosity to know whether it's the same as when I was there last.'

'It will be the same, won't it?'

'Yes. But there's nothing here you want to see. Brenda, this is only upsetting you! Why don't you drive the car home and unpack?'

'Darling, not until you go!'

'I can't go yet. I've got some questions to answer, though I don't think I'm going to be much help. Hold on just a minute!'

'Mark!'

But he stepped over the threshold.

The reading - lamp with the cut - glass amber shade burned again beside the green easy - chair, which first drew his eyes. The chair stood well out from the angle of the left - hand wall with the back wall, and had space behind it. On the little table to the left of the chair, underneath the lamp, lay his copy of *The Woman in White*.

Out from the back wall extended the low bedstead, with 'The Young Witch' in the painting above, and the open door of the bathroom beyond. Facing him, from the wall opposite, the mirrors of the dressing - table were all but blotted out by Dr. Fell. The two windows at the front remained curtained in cretonne with a design of cream and amber.

Except for traces of finger - print powder sprayed or brushed away, except for a sense that many people had trampled here over a soft woolly carpet, the room seemed changed only by Rose Lestrangle's absence.

Mark's gaze moved on past the windows - and stopped.

He paid no particular attention to the large chest of drawers, splotted with finger - print powder, its drawers raggedly pushed where the police had searched, in the angle between the front wall and the right - hand wall. But in front of it was a straight chair.

Across the back of the chair, turned inside out, lay the yellow dress Rose had worn on Saturday night. A suspender - belt was draped across it. Her nylon stockings, neatly rolled, were on the chair. A pair of high - heeled shoes stood on the floor.

He hadn't noticed them on Sunday morning. They brought her back again, tall and enigmatic, with a slightly malicious smile.

At the same moment Dr. Fell, with a large throat - clearing and a red troubled face, lumbered round from the dressing - table.

'Locked doors! Locked windows!' Mark said involuntarily, 'Have you any ideas?'

'Sir,' replied Dr. Fell, 'an absence of ideas is seldom my difficulty. I am worried by those I already possess. Not long ago both you and your wife told me your separate stories about the night of the murder. I am not concerned with those accounts as they affect you two. But I am very much concerned with them as they affect other people, notably certain events in your own house.'

'Well, if there's any question you want to ask?'

'Thank you. Let us begin with Miss Lestrangle herself.'

And now, Mark knew, Brenda was standing behind him in the doorway. Though he could not see her, he could sense her physical nearness and the aura of heightened emotion round her. Mark moved to one side, so that she could watch Dr. Fell.

'As I understand it, you met her only twice: once when she stopped you in College Avenue on Saturday morning; and again towards eleven o'clock at night, when she slipped into your house without ringing the bell, evidently because she believed you were alone there. Nevertheless . . .'

'Yes?' said Mark.

'Very well!' Dr. Fell's narrow eyes flashed open. 'Did she strike you as being in any way crude?'

'I don't quite understand.'

'Crude! No, please, Mrs. Ruthven!' A twinkle and chuckle

animated Dr. Fell; then it died away.' I fear I can see what you were thinking. "If it wasn't crude of her to slip into the house like that, then what is crude?" Weren't you thinking something of the sort?'

Brenda looked taken aback. 'Well - yes! I'm afraid I was.'

'But it is not at all what I mean. Kindly dismiss from your minds, both of you, any judgment you may have made of her private life or morals. Now, sir. From your short acquaintance with her, should you have said she was well - bred?'

'Well - bred? Yes! Yes, certainly!'

'Poised? Well - mannered? At ease?'

'Yes, all of those.'

'Not in any way loutish or awkward?'

'Lord, no!'

'Now observe!' pursued Dr. Fell. 'Miss Lestrangle does not in the least object to gossip that she is having secret assignations at the infirmary with a young man later identified as Frank Chadwick. On the contrary: she only laughs. She does not deny it. It suits her pose as a great amorist.'

'Her "pose"?' Brenda cried out, and then faltered. 'What do you mean by "her pose"?''

Mark's mind turned inwards. Through his brain, with new clarity and vividness, rang words Judith Walker had spoken about Rose Lestrangle.

'But how would she have felt,' asked Dr. Fell, 'about a different kind of accusation? How would she have felt at being accused of cavorting all over the gymnasium, drawing pictures on the wall and dropping weights on men's heads, for no reason except that she is supposed to be a slightly pathological case? How would she have enjoyed gossip like that?'

'She wouldn't have enjoyed it,' Mark said simply.

'No; you can bet she wouldn't. Yet that same accusation, in all sincerity, was made to her face by Toby Saunders.'

Here Dr. Fell lumbered over to the left - hand window. There was a clash or metal rings as he opened the amber - and - green curtains. He opened the curtains of the second window.

'At shortly past eleven o'clock on Saturday night, at your own house, you handed her your copy of Wilkie Collins's 'Armada'. Sir, I don't doubt that was the book; but did any - one actually mention the title?'

'Yes!' Brenda answered for Mark. 'She did! One of her first remarks (after saying the doorbell wouldn't ring) was that Mark had promised to lend her Armada.'

Dr. Fell nodded, peering out of the window.

'Afterwards, according to my information from Sam Kent, she was brought home by Toby Saunders and Caroline Kent in Dr. Saunders's car. They stopped in the lane out there, perhaps not very far from where your own car is parked now. The three of them sat in the front scat. And Toby Saunders attempted to inspire her with what he rather frighteningly called the fear of God. He more than intimated he knew quite well she was the "joker" of the gymnasium.'

Dr. Fell paused.

'Now, still according to the evidence, how did she take this accusation? Her only actual words were, "Dr. Saunders, tomorrow morning you will hear of something." Is that correct?'

'So I heard, anyway,' replied Mark.

'Toby Saunders acknowledges she took it badly. She was a sick - looking, or desperate - looking, or (he adds) something else too. He says it put her into a mood for possible suicide, and he

feared he had gone too far. Correct?'

'Yes.'

'But Miss Kent, questioned privately by her father, has a somewhat different interpretation. Rose Lestrangle (she thinks) seemed furiously angry, but so dumbfounded that for the moment she could say no more. And I believe we may accept that more prosaic explanation.'

'I think so too.'

'Angry! Taken aback! Momentarily deprived of speech! "Dr. Saunders, tomorrow you will hear of something." Interpreted in this way, what do those words sound like?'

'To me,' Mark said after a pause, 'they sound like a threat.'

'Yes. I agree. And this leads us to a further question.' For a moment Dr. Fell looked at him steadily. 'Is your friend Toby Saunders an honest man?'

Mark stiffened. 'Now stop a bit! I can't have you implying . . .'

'Sir, I do not imply. I mean no more or less than I seem to mean. Is he an honest man?'

'Toby is probably the most honest man I've ever known. He can't bear cruelty or injustice; if anything, he's a little too thin - skinned. Why, I was telling Brenda earlier this evening . . .!'

'Sir, I am aware you were. I overheard you.'

'And I remember an instance, when we were both undergraduates - -'

'What was the instance?'

'But that happened years ago!'

'What was the instance, please?'

The two voices struck at each other in the stuffy room, across the chair over which lay Rose LeStrange's dress, with her stockings and shoes beneath.

Brenda, in her own tightly fitting white dress, a little flared at the skirt, looked from one man to the other in evident apprehension of a quarrel. What must have quietened her, as it certainly quietened Mark, was the understanding and compassion in the face of Gideon Fell.

'Yes?' Dr. Fell prompted gently.

'In our senior year, Toby flew out at a man named Harben and virtually accused him of cribbing ideas for a thesis. Afterwards he couldn't sleep. He went over to Addison Hall at four o'clock in the morning, to wake Harben up and apologize. He didn't like Harben; he was not convinced he'd been wrong; but he felt it was the only thing to do. There's only one word for Toby, and that's quixotic. If you doubt his honesty - -'

Brenda, in the doorway, suddenly pressed her left hand under her heart.

'Sir, I have never doubted his honesty,' said Dr. Fell.

'Then what - -?'

'Let us return, if you please, to what we actually know of this case.'

'Yes?'

'After uttering the words, "Dr. Saunders, tomorrow morning you will hear of something", Rose LeStrange climbed out of the car. At eleven - thirty (observe the time) Toby Saunders and Miss Kent drove away. They left her standing under the street - lamp, clasping the book to her breast.'

Again Dr. Fell mused, the corners of his moustache drawn down.

'Here, for a moment or two, admittedly we enter the realm of conjecture. Yet it is not so very difficult to reconstruct what happened afterwards.

'This woman Rose LeStrange is sly, she is malicious, she is cruel, but always in her own lady - like way. Even when she is accused of antics in the gymnasium, she must keep a cool demeanour and a smiling face. She turns. She walks up the path into this bungalow.

'And there, by thunder, is where this affair begins to scare me! That is why I said there would be more trouble, and perhaps even tonight. Just before I found you two in Hewitt Street, Sam Kent finished telling me everything he knew. Sam, for all his wisdom, is an innocent. You are innocents too. Unless I can prevent it, there is a trap waiting for all of you.'

'A trap?' Mark echoed. 'Set by whom?'

'Set by the police,' said Dr. Fell.

The silence stretched out. . . .

'But that's impossible!' exclaimed Mark.

'My dear sir,' said Dr. Fell, distressed, 'do you imagine the police were so easily deceived into accepting this woman's death as suicide?'

'Why not?'

'There are three main reasons why not. For one, look here!'

Propping both his canes against the wall between the windows. Dr. Fell moved in front of the right - hand window. Its locked catch, faintly discoloured by the beginning of rust, was hard to open; but Dr. Fell wrenched it back. Then he pushed up the window.

Moving over to the left - hand window, he unlocked and raised that as well. All that remained were the wire screens

fixed with small hooks into the lower frame of each window.

'You observe?' insisted Dr. Fell. 'Whatever may have been the custom in Wilkie Collins's day, people do not sleep in bedrooms with windows closed and locked. Particularly not on a stifling night towards the end of July. The mere presence of these wire screens, to keep out insects' - he ran his fingernail across one - 'indicates the windows were usually kept open. In America you are so used to window - screens that you never even see them. In England we don't have them at all; and I invariably notice. You follow me?'

'Yes,' said Mark.

'Is it likely that a woman bent on suicide by stabbing herself would first close and lock the windows? Conversely, for my second point, would she have left the front door wide open as you found it? One act or the other, in a state of distraction, she might have done; but not opposite acts at the same time. You follow that too?'

'Yes. I - I never thought . . .!'

'Finally, look at the dressing - table. No, I beg of you not to utter curses; merely look at the dressing - table and the green - topped stool in front of it.'

'Well? What about it?'

'Wherever else in the room Rose Lestrangle was stabbed to death, she was not killed at that dressing - table. And Lieutenant Henderson must have known it all the time.'

Mark glanced at the dressing - table. Brenda's image, face slightly pale, was reflected from the central mirror and in profile at each side.

'May I try to prove this?' Dr. Fell insisted. 'Mrs. Ruthven! I would not twist you on a rack or frighten you with unmeaning bogeys. But will you look straight into the central mirror?'

'Y - yes?'

'Imagine you are about to commit suicide. At one blow you are to drive through your heart a narrow, double - edged steel blade with a silver and mother - of - pearl handle. Don't flinch; not a few women have done just that! But could you sit down there and watch your own death in a mirror?'

'No! Oh, God, no!'

'Why not?'

'It would be bad enough to think of what would happen! You couldn't possibly look into a mirror and watch what happened.'

Dr. Fell's big voice lifted slightly.

'Nor could any woman,' he said. 'To the best of my knowledge, it has never occurred in the statistics of suicide. Turn away, Mrs. Ruthven; forgive me, and turn away.'

Dr. Fell spoke more earnestly still.

'A last test, then! No, Mrs. Ruthven; not for you! If your husband will sit down on the stool in front of the dressing - table, we shall try to demonstrate something else.'

Brenda's image had melted from the mirror. Mark found himself seated amid looking - glasses, his knees too high to go under the ledge where cold - cream jars, perfume - bottles, a whole array of toilet - articles were ranged round a powder - bowl on a lace spread.

'The stab that killed her, you recall, was exactly like a suicide's blow. Someone, standing behind her while she was seated, struck down over the right shoulder to the left breast. She was taken unaware, with no time to struggle, guard, or even move from the direction of the blow. If we observe just how - -'

A black shape sprang up in all the mirrors, striking down.

Instinctively Mark threw up his right arm and jumped to his feet. His knee whacked the ledge with a numbing shock; glass rattled and rang; the mirrors quivered to broken light - reflections. Two small bottles had toppled over.

Then Mark straightened up, the stool fallen behind him on the carpet.

'I see,' he said, with pain twisting through his knee but coolness restored to his mind. 'She was sitting down, but she was not sitting here. The one time you can't be taken unawares is when you are sitting in front of three mirrors.'

'Right.'

Dr. Fell, redder of face from so much exertion, wheezed an apology beside him.

'You know,' Mark continued, with even more bitterness than he had felt in the New Library, 'I always believed I was a reasonably intelligent man. I take that back. The denseness of my stupidity - -'

'No,' Dr. Fell interrupted him, with rounded vehemence.

'The answer is still yes. I never even saw the obvious.'

'Sir, it is only that you have lived amid crimes in books. So has Sam Kent; so indeed has the murderer, else he would have baulked at locked windows in July.'

'The police have guessed this was murder all along? But Lieutenant Henderson said - -'

'Ah. Exactly. "Lieutenant Henderson said." When Sank Kent told me what he actually said, these ancient eyes crossed (thus) and I felt the wallop of a blunt instrument on my skull. He blandly asked Sam whether Rose Lestranger had not stabbed herself in front of a mirror, quote, "as women suicides sometimes did". Oh, my ancient hat! You heard him say it?'

'No; but I heard it by report.'

'Well! Women suicides don't do that, as any experienced police - officer knows. The reference has been dragged in deliberately. He suspected Sam's glibness: he was waiting and whistling.'

'Then why didn't he act?'

'Clearly because he could not understand, and still doesn't understand in spite of their perfectly genuine tests, how this bedroom was locked up on the inside! No, he cannot arrest anyone. But assuredly he will do something, and that is what I fear.'

Mark glanced over his shoulder.

There was the bedroom door, standing open at right - angles, the key back in its lock on the inside, where the police had put it after their tests.

Brenda had retreated to the hallway, and was watching him. A twinge of pain wrenched up in his knee as he strode to the door and stared at it; but the pain he forgot. He turned the key savagely, noting how hard a twist was needed to turn it.

He dragged the key out of the lock. Its straight stem, its head and flange of about the same size, were covered with faint rust - discoloration which would have shown even the marks of thread: much less of those of any implement to turn it from outside.

It hadn't been tampered with! Mark thrust it back into the lock.

'Dr. Fell,' he said, 'how was this done?'

Dr. Fell reared up too.

'I don't know. And, at the moment, I am content to wait for those notes you spoke of. For the present it does not even

matter: so long as the police don't learn before we do.'

Brenda bit at her lower lip. Love, sympathy, deep concern shone in her eyes. As Mark stepped back into the hallway, she ran to him; and he put his arm tightly round her waist.

'Mark, please don't worry so! I know it sounds silly from me, because I worry all the time; but I hate to see you worried.' She looked up, searching his face, and then looked challengingly at Dr. Fell. 'If the police can't prove anything, what can they do?'

'My dear madam, that is just my own worry. This is not my country; I am none too familiar with the laws.'

'But - -'

'They can delay the inquest. They can be very leisurely about taking statements from witnesses, as you note they have already been. They can set a trap and wait for someone, anyone, to make a slip; and we can't wait.'

'Then what can we do?'

'Archons of Athens! Our only course, as I have tried to indicate, is to protect ourselves with truth: to discover exactly what happened in this bedroom when Rose Lestrangle was stabbed to death. It is not so difficult, I repeat, provided you and your husband will help me.'

Mark felt Brenda's waist go rigid under his arm.

'I?' Brenda said. 'But I can't help you, can I? I wasn't anywhere near her when she died.'

'You may have been closer than you think,' said Dr. Fell. 'Come in, Mrs. Ruthven. Let us reconstruct her last hour on earth.'

Brenda blurted out the words; but stopped there as Mark pressed her side. Together they moved towards Dr. Fell, who stood in the middle of the room leaning on his canes.

Brenda's gaze moved across to the now uncurtained windows. A little breeze through the screens was stirring the scent of stale cosmetics and bath - salts.

Dr. Fell watched her.

As though with her own private opinions, Brenda glanced at the yellow dress across the chair. She looked at the dressing - table, then to the left, and up the wall to the reproduction of Anton Wiertz's painting. The flesh - colours of the young woman in the painting, peering over her right shoulder at the ancient hag who attends her departure for the Sabbath, stood out clearly against a dusky red background.

'No!' said Dr. Fell.

'No?' Brenda started and averted her eyes. 'What do you mean, no?'

'Not what you are thinking. Sam Kent very truly told Toby Saunders that he did not understand the dead woman's nature. In the meantime . . .'

'In the meantime,' interposed Mark, 'what do we reconstruct?'

'At eleven - thirty, as I said, we have her standing under the street - lamp with the book in her hands. She walks up the path. She enters the bungalow, presumably dosing the front door, and comes into this room.'

Dr. Fell, with the ferrule of one cane as a pointer, indicated the door and then moved it round.

'So far as we know,' he continued, 'she is not expecting anyone here. But she has much on her mind: anger, yes, but also the delighted knowledge that tomorrow she will expose the real nature of someone in this community who is believed to be of

the highest respectability and integrity.'

Mark, still holding Brenda, put out his left arm as though to ward off a blow. 'I think you'd better explain,' he said.

Dr. Fell, concentrated, made a short gesture.

'Sir, I beg your pardon. I was anticipating the evidence. However, it meant no harm to your wife or yourself: I give you my word for that! Therefore allow me to anticipate it a little further.'

Brenda released her breath.

'Yes?' Mark prompted.

'By the time she has reached this room, I think, she is in an almost happy frame of mind at the prospect. She is neat, tidy, domesticated, as you have seen by everything here.'

He indicated the chair with the dress, the suspender - belt, and the stockings.

'She undresses in her customary neat way. She puts on a white cotton wrap with a red sprigged design, and ties its belt at the left side. Then she puts on a pair of fleece - lined slippers. You saw her dead early the next morning: and you agree to all this?'

Everywhere Mark looked, he seemed to see the triple mirror of the dressing - table and the low - backed stool fallen over beside it.

'She was wearing the wrap, yes. I didn't see any slippers, but then I shouldn't have seen them. She was partly wedged inside that dressing - table: where, as you seem to have shown, she wasn't killed. Somebody stood behind her and stabbed downwards over her shoulder from right to left. If she wasn't at the dressing - table, where was she?'

Dr. Fell opened his eyes wide.

'Do you need to ask?' he said - and pointed.

The green - padded easy - chair, set several feet out from the angles of the wall and with much room to move behind it, seemed in their minds to leap out at them.

The standing - lamp with the cut - glass amber - coloured shade, to the left of the chair, threw its light down over a purplish - dark book with pages spread downwards on the little table.

'Stop!' said Dr. Fell.

Both Mark and Brenda, the latter clutching Mark's sleeve, turned back.

'I say stop,' declared Dr. Fell, 'because your imaginations will carry you too far. Rose Lestrangle undresses in a leisurely way. She puts on the white wrap and the felt - lined slippers. She sits down in that chair to glance over Armadale.

'She has time to read only two or three pages, perhaps, when there is a knock at the front door of this bungalow. She is not expecting any visitor. But it is of no significance. The hour, I estimate roughly, is about a quarter to midnight when she runs out in all gaiety and opens the front door - -'

'To whom?' demanded Mark.

'To the murderer.'

'Is she suspicious of this visitor?'

'As a murderer? No! Someone has come here to kill her. But she never dreams it. She is utterly contemptuous of the person she sees; she would have laughed at any idea of violence.'

'Dr. Fell!' Mark spoke from a thick throat. 'If you say this is true, I won't deny it. But can you prove it? Are you sure of it?'

'Am I sure? Archons of Athens! Am I, is any man, ever sure of

one step of reason or one gleam of insight in all this cosmos? No; I am not sure; but I believe it! And I think you will see the truth if you examine a problem that has bothered you. Why should someone, presumably the murderer, have taken away the copy of Armadale and substituted The Woman in White?

'That's what I've been asking you. Why?'

'Think back! If you had not discovered this substitution early on Sunday morning, when the incident was still fresh in mind, could you ever afterwards have been certain you had not yourself given her the wrong book by mistake?'

'No, I suppose not.'

'Even though a number of pages had been neatly torn from the front of Armadale?'

'Maybe not even then! I can't tell!'

'Very well. Now return to Miss Lestrangle and her visitor at a quarter to midnight. Far from being alarmed, she is overjoyed. She can play cat - and - mouse with one whom she believes her victim. She invites the visitor in here. She sits down again, with the book in her hands. She makes elaborate pretence of reading while she mocks.

'No better opportunity was ever given! Any casual question, such as "What are you reading?" or "Is it good?" allows a murderer to move unsuspected behind her chair. She glances at the book; and the murderer strikes.

'Those blood - spots on her wrap were light - coloured: arterial blood. There is only a short spurt before the thin blade and hilt close the wound. But what would very likely happen to the pages of that book?'

Mark nodded, staring across at the chair.

'Blood - stains,' he said.

'Yes!' said Dr. Fell. 'And what follows from that?'

Mark nodded again.

In imagination, clearly, he saw the woman's body arch forward under the dagger - stab: mouth open, without a scream. The book flew from her fingers and tumbled with closed pages to the carpet. Mark heard himself speaking aloud.

'What followed,' he replied, 'very nearly finished the murderer at the beginning.'

'Yes! It nearly did! Why -?'

'Because this must look like suicide. He couldn't remove the book and destroy it; it was too unusual; someone would remember. But he couldn't leave it here, with blood - stained pages or pages mysteriously torn out. He had to risk a substitution; I myself would think I had given Rose the wrong book.'

'Got it!' snapped Dr. Fell.

'We've been saying "he", of course, for the murderer. It couldn't possibly have been ...?'

'Oh, yes, it could,' grunted Dr. Fell, giving him a quick and odd and nervous glance. 'I am bound to admit, strictly between ourselves, that it might have been a woman.'

'When did it happen? The time of the actual murder?'

'Archons of Athens! I believe it was about twelve - thirty; even before. But how can I or even a police - surgeon possibly say? Why do you ask?'

'Because the dagger wasn't here. It was in the drawing - room across the hall. The murderer had to get it.'

It was as though Dr. Fell, weighed down by other anxieties, could not concern himself with such a trifle. Drops of sweat

stood out on his forehead under the dragged hair.

'And does that trouble you so very deeply? Any excuse at all would have served for the murderer to go into the drawing - room unsuspected. Any excuse! Miss Lestrangle herself may even have provided - - ' He broke off.

Brenda had wrenched away from Mark's arm.

She did not run, or even go very far. But it seemed, for a second at least, that she felt herself stifled and she could not bear to be constricted.

'She did do it! She did do it! I heard her!'

After that cry, Brenda backed away towards the bed, her eyes fixed as though on something out of the window. It was not possible for a man of Dr. Fell's complexion to become pale, yet this was the impression he conveyed.

'Who did it, Mrs. Ruthven?'

Brenda turned her head slowly. ' Oh, God, I don't mean I know who did the murder! No! I mean I heard her voice.'

'Whose voice?'

'That woman's! Rose Lestrangle - - I was there, out on the path, twenty feet or more from here; I told you and Mark I was! I drove up; I got out of the car; but I couldn't go in. And all the more so because I heard that trollop's voice, shouting out to someone and laughing. But I never thought ... I never dreamed...'

Mark made a move towards her. Then, nerves strung up but remembering wisdom, he remained where he was.

Dr. Fell spoke gently. 'Mrs. Ruthven! You heard Miss Lestrangle speaking to someone in this room?'

'Yes!'

'Then the windows were open at the time?'

'I don't know! I didn't notice! They must have been, or I couldn't have heard her.'

'Were the curtains drawn together?'

'Yes! Yes! I couldn't see anything. I do remember that.'

'What, exactly, did you hear Miss Lestrangle say?' Brenda's fingers, with varnished but unreddened nails, crept under what seemed to be high cheek - bones and pressed there.

The bodice of her silk dress rose and fell rapidly before she spoke. "' Darling, will you get me a book - mark from the desk?'"

That was what I heard her say, only louder and - and half laughing. I heard her say it! "Darling, will you get me a book - mark from the desk?"

The words rang and then seemed to hang in the air like an echo. They trembled back from another night, behind drawn curtains.

'Mrs. Ruthven, there is no desk here. Could she have meant the Chippendale writing - desk in the drawing - room?'

'I don't know! I never thought twice of it!'

'Did the other person say anything?'

'No! Not a word. I - -'

So still was the night outside, despite its throb of crickets, that the clanking noise of a car in Harley Lane seemed to affect Brenda worst still. Only Dr. Kent's car, which in addition to its faulty engine had a loose fender he always forgot to repair in his 'workshop', had a noise like that.

'You have already told us the time, Mrs. Ruthven. It was just

as the Founder's Hall clock struck midnight?'

'Yes! It was just then. It was - -'

Brenda's fingers had crept from her cheeks down round her neck. With a last clank and rattle, intensified by silence, the car whirled up and a hand - brake rasped. Brenda turned on Mark a piteous look that went to his heart. Without a word she ran out into the passage.

'Brenda!' This time he was after her in an instant.

'No!' thundered Dr. Fell.

Brenda ran for the front door. Mark, in the passage, hesitated briefly.

'No!' repeated Dr. Fell. 'You were wise a moment ago. Now be wiser still. Give her at least an hour to herself, or you will ruin your reconciliation before it is fully made.'

Brenda had run down the sanded path towards their own car. Mark, about to follow, recognized the advice was good. That look she gave him, of love mixed with an inexplicable shame which fled away from him, told in itself he must wait.

It was too late to follow, in any case. The Chevrolet had gone towards College Avenue. Mark, hurrying to the front door, met Dr. Samuel Kent coming in.

'Er - is anything wrong?' asked Dr. Kent.

'No. Nothing at all.'

'Indeed.' Dr. Kent regarded him curiously, with the vivid dark - brown eyes in the strangely youthful face. 'I have just come from home,' he added somewhat unnecessarily. 'However, before I left I phoned Mrs. Walker's.'

'Oh?'

'Judith is able to answer questions, her doctor says, but she is still unable (or unwilling!) to say what frightened her in the library. If something is wrong here, I wondered - -?'

'Nothing is wrong!'

Mark looked diagonally across the lane. Not until full darkness had he observed that Judith Walker's long, low house, once an early eighteenth - century tavern where students brawled with smallswords, showed a light in almost every window.

Dr. Kent hurried past, clearly with something on his mind. Mark followed. But, in the bedroom, they both stopped when they saw Dr. Fell's face.

'You have just come from your house, you say?' he demanded. 'How far away is your house?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'How far away?' insisted Dr. Fell, with extraordinary intensity. 'How far up the slope of this College Avenue you describe? Half a mile?'

'No, no. The (um!) the whole avenue is just half a mile long. My home is about a hundred yards up from the turning of Harley Lane. Mark's is fifty yards below the lane.'

'Are you telling me,' demanded Dr. Fell, lowering his head and lifting it again, 'you take a car to go a matter of a few hundred yards?'

'Sometimes, yes; especially if one is going to a series of places. It is a habit I have adopted in this country. My dear Fell, can the matter be of the least possible importance?'

'Sir, I don't know!'

'Sir, I do know,' retorted Dr. Kent, who for some reason was in the curt, forceful mood of Sunday morning. "There has been, I see, an explosion here. And I am curious. You have told them,

no doubt?'

'Told them?'

'The real truth about Rose Lestrangle? That they did not understand her?'

'No,' answered Dr. Fell. And he lumbered over to the left - hand window and looked out with his back to the room. 'No; I have not told them.'

That was where Mark Ruthven's temper went to pieces at last.

'Look here!' he said. 'What in hell is all this mysterious talk about not understanding her? A lot of adjectives have been used to describe her. "Well - mannered, well - bred."

"Sly, smiling, secretive." Also, in Judith Walker's words, she was "clever, insinuating, and horribly cruel". All those adjectives fitted her, surely? They were true?'

'Oh, yes,' Samuel Kent answered. 'They were quite true.'

'Then what's the mystery? What is it we don't understand? Malice or cruelty are the worst things. Otherwise I refuse to preach any sermons; I decline to be shocked no matter how many lovers she had.'

A sudden change, a kind of waiting stillness, descended on both Dr. Kent and Dr. Fell, who did not turn round from the window.

Samuel Kent, with his iron - grey hair and his dark eyebrows, took the shell - rimmed spectacles out of his breast pocket and held them in the air.

'My dear Mark,' he said with slight asperity, 'nobody in our profession, including the ladies in it, can possibly be shocked at anything. We have read too much. And you still misunderstand! As for these lovers of Miss Lestrangle - -'

'Yes?'

'There were no lovers,' said Dr. Kent, rounding the words. 'She never had any.'

'Are you crazy, or am I?'

'Neither of us, I trust.'

'Look here! Toby Saunders called her sex - mad. Even Judith Walker, though Judith says she was as cold as a fish, knew she entertained any number of them!'

'No, Mark. Sex - mad, Toby said?' The word seemed slightly to irritate him. 'Let me make clear at once that Miss Lestrangle had no interest in sex in any shape or form you can possibly imagine. Is that plain?'

'No, it isn't! We all thought - -'

'So you did. But the matter did not touch her in any way. She pretended it did; a man who does not enjoy alcohol can laugh at the suggestion he is a drunkard, or even encourage it if it helps him in a game which is not alcoholic but intellectual. This lady's interests were purely intellectual and purely devilish. I can prove as much.'

'Prove? But you can't prove a thing like that!'

'Are you sure, Mark? I think I can.'

A polished irony edged Dr. Kent's voice, and the grimness of his mouth and eyes twisted in sardonic amusement.

'To establish a reputation is easy. It will be believed of any man that he drinks, or of any woman that she . . . you understand? My own reputation for absentmindedness, which on some few occasions I really am, has been very useful to me.' The irony deepened as Dr. Kent inclined his head. 'But let me tell you that Simple Simon is not really simple at all. My old friend Gideon Fell, whom I have known since we were at

Balliol, now thinks I clumsily misled the police and made them suspicious.

'Be comforted. I did not need to mislead the police on the only point in which they were interested. Could all their investigations find one single irregularity in the lady's past life? They couldn't; they can't! She was engaged to be married three times, and herself broke each engagement because she could not be troubled with a husband.

'For the last time, stop worrying about the police! The evidence of a locked room virtually convinced them last night. The findings at the autopsy this morning convinced them at last.'

'The autopsy?' Mark almost shouted.

'Yes. It provides proof of what I have been saying.'

'But there's no doubt about how she died, is there?'

'No, there is no doubt about that. Still, autopsies have purposes besides determining the cause of death. Really, Mark. Tut, now! If you don't, believe me, ring up Dr. Beresford, the coroner of Alexandria County. It is not impossible, but so unlikely as to amount to a virtual certainty, that Rose Lestrangle never had one lover in the thirty - one years of her life.'

Dr. Kent frowned, gestured, and almost raised his voice as he added: 'You see, she was interested only in blackmail.'

13

ROSE LESTRANGE had laughed a good deal in life. She must have been laughing even more maliciously in death.

'Blackmail?' Mark repeated. He groped and fought for what he thought he knew. 'But she was a wealthy woman, wasn't she? She kept no maid and did all her own housework, but didn't she have as much money as she needed?'

'More money than she needed.'

'Then what - -?'

'She did not blackmail for money. There can be blackmail for pleasure too. Let me show you where I fear you have been blind.'

Throughout all this, Mark vaguely noticed as not the least eerie part of it, Dr. Gideon Fell had not said a word.

He seemed withdrawn, disassociating himself from the matter, his huge bulk motionless and (Mark could have sworn) almost frightened as he stood staring out of the window. From his side - pocket he took the gaudily coloured cigar - box, now much depleted; but he did not open it.

Dr. Fell here said one word: 'Blind!' It was said in a low voice, like the rumble of a distant train in a subway tunnel; it seemed to refer to himself as his mind groped and he looked out diagonally across the lane.

But it followed Mark as Dr. Kent led the way across the hall to the white - panelled drawing - room.

The drawing - room door was half closed. Where the bedroom had been dimly illuminated, murky of appearance and even suggestion, light blazed even through the keyhole of the door from a room of silver candelabra, silver coffee - service, and Chippendale furniture.

'It was a pity,' Samuel Kent said abruptly, in the middle of the drawing - room. 'Yes! Whatever one thought of the lady, it was a pity.'

'What was?'

'She loved life, but hated people. She had, I think, all a woman could wish for. She had beauty, health, intelligence, breeding, money, all of this world's gifts. But I - I sat there, at that dining - table, and because of her laughter I knew she hated

mankind. Look!'

His shell - rimmed spectacles, lifted briefly, indicated the row of framed newspaper - cartoons which hung on every wall. Famous characters in public life, of high honour and purpose, were shown as buffoons only redeemed by comedy from being grotesque.

Dr. Kent was not at ease now.

'I don't pretend fully to understand her.' He made a slight gesture with the glasses. 'Only Swift could have done that, or Schopenhauer, or someone else who despised mankind. But look there! That is how she saw the world, or wished to see it.'

'You mean she came to live here,' Mark demanded, 'because this is an ordered and highly respectable community? And Rose LeStrange, for her own satisfaction, had to prove it was nothing of the kind?'

'Yes. That is what I mean.'

'And her "blackmail"? It consisted in prying out secrets about people, and then torturing them by threatening to tell?'

'Yes. Do you begin to see now? Do you wonder that she said she loved sharp steel?'

Once the impact of revelation was over. Mark had begun to understand only too well. Echoes came back out of the past: a reference, an allusion, a remembered voice. Things uncertain altered shape into things undeniably certain.

'I'll be quite honest,' he said. 'I was so concentrated on those other pictures, the Goya drawing and the Wicitz painting, that I couldn't think of the woman except as a charmer of the flesh. But witchcraft, of course - -'

'Ah!' said Dr. Kent.

'- witchcraft, of course, was only a mockery and bitter parody

of Christian ritual. She flaunted those, witchcraft pictures for a double purpose. They underlined her pose as a femme fatale in the accepted sense, at the same time as they mocked life and faith together.'

'I dare say. I had not analysed the matter so far.'

'But we've got to analyse it! Don't they provide a lead to her murderer?'

'Do they? I wonder!'

'Yes I They do! Rose Lestrangle might not have had lovers. But she damn well encouraged men, as everybody can testify. Her "blackmail for pleasure" may have a hold over some man who lost his head and went too far when she resisted. Isn't that one of the things you're suggesting?'

Now it was Dr. Kent's turn to be taken aback. A curious look, instantly veiled, came into his eyes.

'My dear Mark, I never thought of suggesting that!'

'Then what secrets did she hold over people?'

'Not "people", I trust. Only one person among us, I hope and pray.'

'Yes, Dr. Kent? Who was that?'

For a moment silence held the white drawing - room, evilly dusted with finger - print powder like the bedroom. The tallboy writing - desk between the windows had its desk - shelf let down where the police had searched.

'I have said before,' retorted Dr. Kent, hesitating, 'that beyond proving Miss Lestrangle's true nature I am sure only of what I don't know - -'

'But that's the trouble!'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Your disclosure hasn't helped greatly. It's only unloosed a whole new genie - bottle of motives which may apply to anyone.'

'For instance?'

'Well! I was thinking of Master Frank Chadwick. When I asked him about Rose, outside Barney's in Queenshaven, he said, "That - -!" and looked as though his vanity had been scratched clear through. When people have as much conceit as Chadwick, women mustn't drive them too far.'

Again Mark stopped, this time to reflect.

'Wait, though,' he added, 'that won't do either! Chadwick's out of this. He's like Brenda in one respect; he's got an alibi as big as a house. All I can think of is that we're worse off than we were before.'

'Come! Tut! Surely it's not as bad as all that? Has Fell made no progress?'

'He's reconstructed the whole murder, except for the trifling detail of explaining the locked room. He's established the presence of the murderer in the bedroom at midnight. I think he's guessed who the murderer is, but I can't swear - -'

Dr. Kent interposed sharply. 'Fell knows the murderer?'

'I repeat: I can't swear to that. And are the police after us, or aren't they? Dr. Fell - -'

This was the point at which Dr. Fell appeared outside the half - open door.

During their remarks they could hear him blundering in the passage outside. Apparently he was surveying both the little breakfast - room and the little kitchenette at the back; they heard doors creak.

Now, standing still outside the drawing - room for a long moment which increased Mark's sense of tension, he waited there before pushing the door wide open with one cane.

Manoeuvring himself sideways through the doorway, he loomed up with his chins lifted and a less - than - charitable look above the lopsided eyeglasses. Samuel Kent attacked at once.

'Is this true, Fell? I scarcely wish to press you,' and Dr. Kent spoke dryly, 'even over a matter of this kind. But is Mark on the right track? Do you know who the murderer is?'

'No!' said Dr. Fell. He rapped the ferrule of his cane on the thin carpet, and regarded Mark steadily.

'Among many possibilities,' he went on, 'there are two persons who might be guilty. If I mentioned either person, here and now, you would chuck that candelabrum straight at my head. More than that! Two sides of the case must be made to fit and interlock before we can see truth. I am not surprised at your attitude. But, by thunder, I am surprised at Sam Kent!'

Now he glared at Dr. Kent.

'You, sir, have no wish to press me? Thank'ee! My gratitude fills abysses and o'erwhelms the sky. Especially at your own headlong rush to give information.'

'Fell! I have done my best! When I first phoned you in New York, I told you - -'

'You told me many things. In the name of sanity, let frankness out of your soul and say what is on your mind. What, aside from the murder itself, is the centre and core of this whole affair?'

Dr. Kent's mouth tightened.

'The person,' he retorted, 'who has been not very aptly called the joker of the gymnasium.'

'Oh, ah?'

'Yes! Miss Lestrangle herself, of course, was not the "joker". Toby Saunders's notion was absurd from the beginning. But Miss Lestrangle had discovered who the "joker" really was. In her frantic quest for secrets she had discovered the one guilty secret here among us. The murderer stabbed her to keep her silent - - Can you deny this?'

Dr. Fell did not reply.

'Can you deny it, I say?' asked Samuel Kent.

'I - -'

'Who the "joker" was I don't know,' explained Dr. Kent, holding up his spectacles. 'I have never pretended to know. But you will mislead yourselves if you even use the word "joker". As I maintained from the beginning, two deliberate attempts at murder were made in the gymnasium. Someone, for whatever reason, tried to kill first old George Johnson and next young Hubert Johnson.

'Fell, can anyone now think that was a joke? Miss Lestrangle was murdered because she knew the truth. And have you forgotten that last night someone threw a forty - pound plaster bust at Judith Walker's head in the library? Mrs. Walker is over at her house at this minute, still not daring to tell what frightened her so much afterwards.'

Dr. Kent, folding up his spectacles and returning them to his breast - pocket, nodded towards the windows of the drawing - room.

Those windows had curtains of claret - coloured velvet. But the curtains were seldom drawn; they were not drawn now. Through open windows, against the dampish warm night with its hum of crickets, they could see across towards Judith's house - lighted in nearly every window. No sound came from it.

'Is it even necessary for me to explain all this?' Dr. Kent asked, when neither Mark nor Dr. Fell answered. 'Confound it. Fell, I thought you agreed!'

'Hurrrum! Hah! - - Agreed?'

'On everything! When we were at Mike's Place, after Mark had gone out to see young Chadwick, you seemed to agree. Miss Lestrangle, you said, was not the "joker" of the gymnasium and would have been revolted at the notion. Admittedly she had no objection when people whispered scandal about her, she even visited the infirmary in secret with Francis Chadwick. . . '

'Infirmary!' interrupted Mark, startling the other two. 'Infirmary!'

Both academic doctors swung round on him.

'If what you say about Rose Lestrangle is true,' Mark declared, 'it explains everything in her behaviour except those secret visits to the infirmary.'

'I fail to see - - ' Dr. Kent was beginning with some asperity, when Mark cut him off.

'She had no lovers at all! ' Mark insisted. 'True?'

'True, of course,' admitted Dr. Kent.

'Chadwick visited her constantly; he tried to win her over, we suppose; and (I don't doubt this part!) was furious when she only laughed at him?'

'I speak no scandal, thank you! At the same time - er - yes, I have no doubt that is substantially what must have happened.'

'Then why should she have paid secret visits to the infirmary, with Chadwick or any other man? It becomes nonsense! It's incredible! Or do you think Judith Walker invented the whole story?'

Samuel Kent stared back at him.

'Mrs. Walker told you that?'

'Yes. Judith said she saw them, and Rose Lestrangle opening the door of the infirmary with a key. Do you think Judith invented it?'

'Unfortunately, Mark, I am sure she did not. Oh, confound it! Mrs. Arnold Hewitt, the wife of the Master, herself saw Miss Lestrangle and some unidentified young man going into the infirmary in the same way.'

Dr. Kent held up his hand as Mark began to speak.

'And I beg of you,' Dr. Kent added, 'not to ask me why the lady should have done this! I have, I think, some small knowledge of human nature. On the other hand, I am no detective in the sense Gideon Fell is. But I would venture a small prediction at this point. Discover the reason for those secret visits to the infirmary, and you may discover the whole truth.'

Dr. Gideon Fell, braced on both canes, expelled his breath.

'Oh, my God,' whispered Dr. Fell.

Samuel Kent, as though he could not believe what he saw or heard, went a shade paler.

'I have known you for thirty - five years,' he said, 'but I have never heard you look or speak quite like that before. What's the reason? Is it because I am so wildly wrong?'

'No, no, no!' thundered Dr. Fell. 'It is because, though you don't know it, you may be so uncannily right.'

From somewhere across the lane, in the damp hollow where mist arose at night, a woman screamed.

They heard it clearly, with all windows open. There was nothing to tell where it came from; yet none of them doubted

it was from Judith Walker's house, or that the woman who screamed was Judith.

Mark, turning his head, looked straight out of one window and down the sanded path towards the street - lamp. For an instant he did not dare turn towards Judith's house. Instead his eyes rested on the great 'octopus' beech - tree under which he and Judith had stood to talk on Sunday morning.

He was just in time to see the shadow of a man's head dart back into cover behind the trunk of the tree.

Someone was watching the bungalow. Someone, it might be, had been watching and listening for quite a time.

He had no chance to think what it might mean. Dr. Fell was speaking to him.

'Get over to Mrs. Walker's! Get over there in a hurry! I do not believe she is in any danger, but who am I to believe? In the meantime . . .?'

Mark ran for the door.

'In the meantime?' he heard Samuel Kent ask.

'Why, sir,' he heard Dr. Fell wheezily reply, 'I can only hope for a secret to be drawn from that Chippendale writing - desk between the windows.'

Mark heard no more. The open air brought him no coolness as he ran down the path. Under the street - lamp he stopped. There was nobody behind the tree; the paved lane seemed deserted until he caught the soft note of a car - engine.

Dr. Kent's car was parked well to the left of the path. Another car, which had been standing well ahead of it and beyond the glow of the street - lamp, moved out softly and gathered speed in the direction of Queenshaven.

It was a police - car.

But, in the desperate urgency of the scream from across the road, Mark disregarded the implications of that police - car. He did not have far to go before he reached the front door of the long, low house.

He pressed the doorbell. Its chimes rose and rang on liquid - sounding notes inside, but there was no answer. He waited for what seemed minutes, and was probably about thirty seconds; then he rang again without effect.

But there must be somebody here!

When he had looked in during the late afternoon, Mrs. Kent and Caroline had not yet left. Judith's doctor and a trained nurse were with her too; Judith was still under a sedative.

Mark stood back and studied the house.

Behind it was an orchard, where fireflies wove a spectral pattern in the dark places under the trees. No blinds were drawn on the lighted windows; you could see into corners of many small, rather dingy rooms, but you could also hear a clock ticking inside against stillness.

When he remembered what had occurred in the library, and what might have occurred here tonight, he ran at the door and wrenched at the knob. It was locked. Before getting in through a window, he tried a last ring.

For the third time the chimes of the doorbell rang and rippled inside. Almost instantly, even with an effect of abruptness, the door was opened by Judith Walker herself.

'Hel - lo, Mark!' Judith said gaily. 'How very nice to see you! Come in, won't you?'

And she pushed open the outer screen door.

The sense of relief held him dumb. Nothing at all, he decided, would ever happen as you expected it. You anticipated no trouble, and trouble leaped. You feared for danger or even

murder, and instead - -

'Judith! Are you all right?'

'All right? But of course I'm all right!' Judith laughed loudly. 'And you needn't stand there, need you? Do come in.'

'I mean: didn't you hear me ring?'

'Not at first, I'm afraid. I am so terribly sorry! But I was upstairs in - in what used to be Dan's study, and I couldn't hear at first.'

'Judith, didn't you scream a while ago, maybe a minute or two?'

'Scream?' repeated Judith. Again her husky laughter rang and rippled like an echo of the doorbell. 'No, I - I don't think so. Why on earth should I have screamed? And aren't you coming in?'

She was silhouetted against dim, quiet light, her pale red hair haloed. Judith still wore the brown silk pyjamas, with white edging, she had worn this afternoon. There were flat slippers as well.

Still unable to dismiss the brush of the nightmare, Mark went in. Most of these events, he was thinking, seemed to consist of people unexpectedly appearing at doors or outside windows.

Yet nothing could have been more healthy, as opposed to the unhealthy atmosphere of Rose LeStrange's cottage, than the room he entered. It had once been a tavern - parlour: there was no disguising the stone - flagged floor or the great fireplace or the low beamed ceiling.

But bright rag rugs, shelves of bright - jacketed books lent colour to old wood in lamplight, no less than the bowls of red carnations against feathery white cosmos. The clock ticking in here, of course, was the grandfather clock he had seen five hundred times.

'Screamed?' Judith suddenly said again, as though she had not heard him before.

'Yes. Somebody did. We heard it. You're not all alone here, are you?'

'Oh, good heavens, no! Dr. Maracot insisted on leaving Miss Harding - -'

'The nurse? Where is she?'

'She's only gone into Queenshaven to get something made up, some prescription Dr. Maracot left. Though there's no earthly reason why she should be here at all.'

From the pocket of her pyjamas Judith snatched out a folded piece of paper and held it up.

'Wilkie Collins!' she said. 'You see, Mark dear, I'm trying to solve the mystery. I must solve it, mustn't I, if I call myself intelligent at all? Dan would have said so. You think I must too, don't you? Come here! Come here!'

Judith beckoned to him.

'The motive is easy enough,' she went on, trying to attain rapid speech but not succeeding. 'I know where she got the key to the infirmary, and I know where she got the luminous paint. But where, where, was the luminous paint hidden afterwards?'

Judith swung round in the lamplight. And for the first time he saw her eyes.

PART FOUR

INTRUSIVE MAN

'Fly open, lock, to the dead man's knock,

Fly bolt, and bar, and band! Nor move, nor swerve, joint, muscle, or nerve

To the touch of the dead man's hand!

- R. H. Barham, Ingoldsby Legends.

'Tick - tick' went the big clock at its unhurried pace.

'Don't you see?' Judith insisted in a soft voice. 'You can't walk into just any store and say, "I want some luminous paint". You can't even get it from a magical supply house. You have to write to a firm in Ohio (Columbus, I think) that caters for fake spirit - mediums; and they send it. It's harmless and cheap and looks like ordinary white paint. That's what Dan did, when we gave a Christmas party once.'

Judith peered quickly round the room.

'The key to the infirmary came from the Administration Office. They keep spares there. They'd never notice - -'

'Judith!' interrupted Mark.

'They'd never notice if you stole one, and had a copy cut out from it, and returned the original. They - -'

'Judith! Who did this?'

'Tick - tick' went the big clock.

'Rose Lestrangle, of course! She - -'

It was her eyes from which Mark could not look away.

Once before, in the New Library, he had seen the pupils of her blue eyes contracted by the shining of light in a dark hall. Now they were contracted because the doctor had given her some sedative stronger than any of the barbiturates.

Up to then Judith had been moving in a dream. He could not tell at what point she was shocked out of it, with most of the drug - haziness clearing from her mind.

'Mark!' she breathed in a more normal voice. Some of the

glaze had gone from the eyes, together with the blue shadows of insomnia beneath them. 'When did you get here? Wait, though!' The edge of her hand, clutching the folded piece of paper, went up to her forehead. 'Yes, of course! You got here, and you asked me something.'

Even now she had not recovered. There were times, alarming him, when she hovered between reality and dream.

'Yes!' she said in her fairly normal tone. ' You asked me whether I had screamed. I remember now. I did scream: it's perfectly true. I did scream. But I can't remember why.'

'Easy, Judith! Hadn't you better lie down?'

"Oh, no! I've slept too much as it is. Phil Maracot said it would do me good to walk, and help wear off what he gave me. But why did I scream?'

'Listen to me! If you won't lie down, at least sit down. Take it easy.'

'All right.'

It was an obedient murmur. She sat down gingerly on the edge of a low sofa. Only the pendulum of the clock stirred and switched in the old room, with its bright colours and its scent of cloves from the cosmos - flowers.

'There!' Judith added, and pointed to the great black cavern of the fireplace.

Mark followed her eyes and grew uneasy still.

'Just exactly two hundred years ago this summer, when this house was Lockarby's Tavern,' Judith cried, 'it started there, in front of that fireplace. The sword - fight began there and ended out in the yard under the sign of the "George ", when this young man was run through the throat.

'The college authorities wouldn't interfere, and the legal

authorities wouldn't either, because it was a fair fight. Police! They didn't have police then, of course. It couldn't happen nowadays, could it? A duel like that?'

'No, of course it couldn't. Now look here, Judith - -'

'Then why did I scream? I don't think the house is haunted, as they say. Why did I scream?'

You can deal with someone in her senses or completely out of them, but this wavering between could be an unnerving business. Mark wished the nurse would return.

'What happened two hundred years ago doesn't matter,' he urged gently. ' And it doesn't matter why you screamed. All that matters . . .'

He went on talking, and it seemed to have a soothing effect. Judith nodded and smiled.

'I know! I'm quite all right now. It's just what I was telling you when you came in. What's important is solving the mystery of the locked room.'

'No! That's not important either. You must rest!'

'Oh, Mark, I can get all the rest I need. I'm going away tomorrow, to visit my sister and brother - in - law in Richmond. In the meantime, don't you want to hear? Don't you want to know what I saw in the library last night?'

Tick - tock measured the beats of the clock during a pause.

'No, Judith, I don't want to know.'

'How strange! Everyone else does.'

'I don't want to know. If you go over it, it will only be worse for you until you've completely recovered. Rest! Rest!'

'And yet, I could trust you not to tell anyone. I mustn't, you

know! I mustn't! But the mystery - -'

'Judith, forget the mystery!'

'No, Mark. Don't say that. Look here.'

She unfolded the piece of paper she had crumpled up in her hand, and held it out to him. With another of those uncanny changes, her eyes and the expression on her face had become almost completely clear.

On the paper, he recognized the small, neat handwriting of her late husband, Dr. Dan Walker. It was easy to remember he had told Dr. Walker all about what was known of the plot - device for a certain book. But he had forgotten - -

What he saw was headed: 'Wilkie Collins's notes for his unwritten novel, The Dead Man's Knock, notes made and dated December 14th, 1867.

'Judith, where did you get this?'

'It was in Dan's study, among his papers. I thought he said you'd let him take a copy, but I couldn't be sure until I found that. It is a copy, isn't it?'

It was very much a copy. For the hundredth time he read again those brief, broken, sometimes illegible words:

1. Seen outside or inside, through windows, it cannot be detected.
2. Try (three words completely illegible).
3. A reliable witness (George Hathaway?) testifies to hearing the noise of a file sawing at bars on the night of the murder. But there are no bars on the windows of the room, or anywhere on the house. Important: mention at least twice.
4. Do they find the file? Unnecessary!

That was all, except for a careful addition underneath in the late Dr. Walker's tidy way.

I copy the above by permission of my friend Mark Ruthven. The original notes were written on the flyleaf of a book in Wilkie Collins's library - a copy of Sheridan Le Fanu's Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery (Dublin 1851) - which was sold at auction with the library, and is now in Mr. Ruthven's possession.

While the clock ticked and the old bones of this house suggested acts of violence here in the past, Mark read the addition.

Judith, in her brown - and - white pyjamas, perched gingerly on the edge of the sofa, appealed to him as though this were the sole interest of her life.

'Mark, what do those notes mean?'

'I don't know.'

'Something is to be done with a file. We can tell that from note number four. And it's to be done to a window, to judge by note number one. But how on earth can you seal up a room with a file used on the window?'

'I don't know.'

'But you said - -'

'I hope you didn't misunderstand too, Judith, as Dr. Fell misunderstood. When I told you I knew three - quarters of it, I meant the facts and not the trick.'

'Dr. Fell?' Judith's head jerked up. 'Oh, yes! He must have got here! They wouldn't tell me anything. Is he here?'

'Yes. He's over at the Red Cottage now, saying something about a writing - desk.'

'What does he think of the notes?'

'He hasn't seen them yet. He says they can wait.'

'Isn't there some more evidence, though? Last night, in the library, you read me one letter to Dickens. Aren't there two more?'

'Yes, there are two more. They don't help in the least. They deal only with the story and the characters, without any reference to the room; they're completely irrelevant to our particular problem.'

With the copy of the notes in one hand, Mark took the typewritten copy of the first letter from his inside pocket and held out both.

'All the evidence we've got about that infernal novel,' he continued, 'is here: in these two pieces of paper. We can't go any further.'

'Do we need to go further? If you have some idea how to interpret both of them or fit them together - -?'

'For the last time, I don't know.' Mark spaced his words, trying to be gentle and to keep down rage. 'And, what is more, by this time I don't care.'

'Don't care?' Judith rose slowly to her feet, under - lip trembling. 'Honestly, really and truly, I'm all right and you don't have to humour me.'

'I'm not humouring you. I'm telling you the truth.'

'But if you - -'

'Look at these!' He shook both sheets. 'For over a year I've puzzled my head at them. I've assumed, as I told you yesterday morning, it would be something brand - new and highly ingenious, with all the clues given. I've assumed it simply because The Moonstone was all those things; but have I

any concrete reason to assume it?'

'Well, haven't you a reason?'

'No! Except in my own imagination, none whatever. There may be no clues at all. The explanation may be only a sell or a swindle.'

If he had been trying to apply shock - tactics to restore her to normal, which he was not, he could hardly have succeeded better.

'Mark, it can't be! How can it? Didn't . . . didn't someone use the trick in real life?'

'That's only assumption, too. I've gone on repeating it, like an idiot, and perhaps led everybody in the wrong direction. So far as I can tell,' and he held up both papers, 'there isn't a single clue in either of these. And now I'm sick and tired of trying to find one.'

'Is that the real reason, Mark?'

'The real reason?'

'The real reason why you want to give up the problem? Or is it because Brenda's come back to you, as Miss Harding says, and you're so obsessed with her you don't want to think of anything else?'

This sturdy, usually self - reliant woman, he thought, could surprise him as Brenda herself never could.

'Be honest! ' Judith said tensely.

'I'm being honest, or trying to be!'

'Well, then?'

'There may be a grain of truth in what you say. But it isn't the main reason. This evening Dr. Gideon Fell reconstructed the

murder and showed just how obtuse and thick - witted a human being can be; and, by the Lord Harry, I'm it.'

Judith struck her small fist into the palm of her left hand.

'Mark, don't say that!'

'I say it because it's true. And, whoever did lock up the room, he thoroughly bamboozled me about the reason why he substituted one book for another. If it hadn't been for an accident, I might think now I had handed the wrong book . . .'

Again Judith struck her fist into her palm.

She did this just as Mark was uttering the words, 'handed the wrong book'. His voice trailed off. He looked at Judith.

'Handed - the - wrong - - ' Mark repeated in a loud, incredulous voice; and stopped dead.

Had any third person been present, that witness would have sensed a change in the atmosphere as palpable as the approach of a thunderstorm.

Mark straightened up, the furrows deepening down his cheeks. Silent, staring past Judith's shoulder, he seemed to be listening intently to the ticking of the clock while second after second went by. His gaze travelled down first to the letter in his right hand, then to the notes in his left hand.

'So that was it!' he said.

He did not need to explain what he was talking about. 'You've guessed it?' Judith cried. 'You know how the room was locked up?'

'Yes.'

'And was it ...?' She gestured towards the papers in his hands.

Mark did not reply. His head was lifted, his heavy dark hair

gleaming in the lamplight.

'Was it?'

'Collins's device? Can we ever be sure? I don't think we can. But if it was his trick, Judith, I can take my oath about this,' he held up the letter, 'and these,' he held up the notes. 'The fan - whiskered so - and - so played fair.'

'Even in the letter to Dickens?'

'Even in the letter to Dickens! From the beginning there's been a dead man prowling outside the door and outside the windows, and knocking hard to get in.'

Even in the night - silence they had heard no car approach in Harley Lane, which once upon a time had been called Blue Ruin Lane. They had not heard the soft, quick approach of some person over the open space of what had once been a tavern - yard. Even the chimes of the doorbell, rising and rippling loudly, failed to catch the attention of either Judith or Mark.

'There are some questions,' Mark said, 'I've got to ask Brenda whether she likes them or not. I must ask her, insist on it, for her own protection and her own good. I can't help it!'

'Mark,' and again Judith's tone had changed, 'don't do it.'

It startled him even in his absorption.

'Don't do what, Judith?'

'Don't carry this any further! Please!'

'But aren't you the one who's concerned with the problem? Aren't you the one who just insisted - -?'

'Oh, never mind what I said! You don't understand what a woman, any woman, may do when she's obsessed by ... any man, not even a particular man. I can't speak more plainly

without making it sound crude, but don't carry this any further. Please.'

For a second time the noise of the doorbell chimed in rising and falling notes. It was followed by a soft but peremptory knocking at the door.

Through the windows, screened but open, they clearly heard the voice of Miss Dorothy Harding, the trained nurse summoned by Dr. Phil Maracot.

'Mrs. Walker! If you don't mind, Mrs. Walker. Will you be good enough to open this door?'

It was Mark who opened it.

Miss Harding, her uniform clear and white against the darkness, a small wrapped medicine - bottle in her hand, did not speak what was so clearly in her mind. All she said, during a mounting tension, was:

'Good evening, Professor Ruthven. I'm afraid Dr. Maracot would be very sorry if you've upset Mrs. Walker.'

'I should be very sorry, too, Miss Harding. Mrs. Walker - has recovered, I hope?'

'We hope she will recover, I'm sure, if she goes upstairs now. Good night. Professor Ruthven.'

'Mark!' Judith cried out.

'Mrs. Walker.' The nurse's tone did not change.

'Mark, don't carry this any further! Promise me!'

'I can't promise that, Judith. You must know I can't.'

'Well, maybe not. Maybe not! But I - I've got to go to Richmond tomorrow afternoon. Will you promise to phone me there, at my brother - in - law's house, at any time after six

o'clock?'

'Mrs. Walker!'

'And for heaven's sake, whatever you do, don't phone from your own house! Will you phone from here? There won't be anybody in the place; and the key will be under the mat.'

'Mrs. Walker,' said the nurse.

Judith turned on her, white - faced, a fury.

'Oh, be quiet, you - -! Mark! Will you promise that?'

'Yes, Judith. I promise.'

'Good night, Professor Ruthven,' said Miss Harding.

He strode down the path outside. Behind him, inside open windows, there was only a strained silence except for the ticking of the clock. In Harley Lane Mark looked towards the Red Cottage - and looked again.

Dr. Samuel Kent's car had gone. A short inspection showed him that the bungalow was as lightless, as silent and deserted, as though it had never been occupied at all.

It took Mark no great time to return to his own house. He cast only one glance up College Avenue, in the other direction, before he saw that Dr. Kent's car was not anywhere else.

His wrist - watch told him it was ten minutes past eleven when he entered his own house.

In the living - room, seated in the white - covered easy - chair facing the open arch to the hall, Brenda had just lighted a cigarette.

The Venetian blinds were drawn. Only the hall lights burned, faintly touching Brenda's white dress and leaving most of the living - room in shadow. But the flame of the match briefly

illuminated her face: taut, strained, uncertain as she bent a little forwards.

The match went out. Brenda dropped it into the standing ash - tray beside the chair. Her voice went up to an unnatural pitch.

'Dr. Fell's in the guest - room,' she said.

'Gone to bed?'

'Yes. He - he asked me to make you his excuses. But he wanted to see those - you know, those notes for the unwritten detective story; so I got the typewritten copy of them out of the filing - cabinet in your study. That was all right, wasn't it?'

'Yes. Of course.'

He was standing under the archway, facing her chair, his shadow falling forwards to where Brenda sat in shadow.

In his right hand he held the two pieces of paper, the two sets of clues. Now was the time to ask her about the vistas they had opened up in his brain! Half a dozen questions! No, three or even two, to clear up all misunderstandings and set her mind (as well as his own) completely at rest.

And yet, before the atmosphere in that living - room, he hesitated. He glanced down at the papers, and back at Brenda's dim image. The glow of the cigarette - end pulsed and darkened.

'Darling,' she said in that same shady voice, 'didn't you stay a long time?'

'Where?'

'At Judith Walker's.'

Brenda rose to her feet. She was not wearing a white dress, he now saw, but a white silk dressing - gown tightly tied at the waist.

'I don't mind!' Brenda cried out. The cigarette - end gestured and glowed. 'Understand that: I don't mind. But aren't you glad to see me?'

Brenda made another gesture, seeking words, and then crushed out the cigarette on the edge of the ash - tray. Fiery sparks rained down.

'You seemed to be, this afternoon,' Brenda stammered. 'You said you were! But if you aren't - -'

'Glad to see you? My God! Come here!'

She ran to him.

Mark crushed the papers in his hand and flung them away in the gloom. To the devil with question, answer, and all such academic nonsense! This was all that mattered, now or at any other time.

And so he forgot the questions. They were to cause him some bad moments before the events in the murder of Rose Lestrangle took their last and most disastrous turn.

17

WHEN the events in the murder of Rose Lestrangle took their last and most disastrous turn, towards sunset on the following day. Mark Ruthven thought he was prepared for anything; even for a thunderbolt.

He had made plans carefully. He could say, with truth, that he really did know three quarters of the solution. And now, he had decided, he was going to snare the whole truth out of a certain person, who should be persuaded to supply it.

But he was not prepared.

Towards dawn of Tuesday, July 20th, when he and Brenda fell asleep, rain began to fall. In a semi - dark world, with grey rain still falling lightly but steadily, they did not wake up until

well past noon, when Mrs. Partridge (aided by a stern - looking but efficient woman named Miss Sweet) brought them breakfast.

Something of domestic chaos ensued. They heard some of the news through Mrs. Partridge and Miss Sweet, and the rest through that college grapevine, or small - community tom - tom, which sends rumour faster than the speed of the phone - calls circulating all day.

Dr. Gideon Fell, leaving an apologetic note, had departed at ten o'clock for a tour of the Lawn and its buildings, conducted by Dr. Kent, as well as subsequent interviews with a number of persons.

Brenda wailed in horror at her lack of hospitality, until Mark shushed her.

If they both guessed trouble was on its way, Mark at least believed he knew what it was. The grapevine rapped out information that Dr. Fell was being entertained with sherry and lunch by Dr. Arnold Hewitt in the stately house at the top of College Avenue. At past one o'clock, finding Brenda at the telephone with a long list of names in her hand. Mark hastily intervened.

'Just a moment. What are you doing?'

'Darling, we've simply got to arrange some kind of dinner for tonight. It's insultingly short notice, and I should have thought of it last night, but - -'

'Don't do it.'

'Don't do what?'

'Don't arrange anything. Not for tonight, anyway. Dinner just for the three of us: say at seven o'clock.'

'Mark, what is it? What's happening?'

And he could not tell her. When she left for some hasty shopping in Queenshaven, after a series of such farewells as might have preceded a year's absence in Europe, he still had asked her no questions.

There are times, especially in heightened emotional moods, when you can't ask questions. It would seem an injury, a disloyalty, an ultimate betrayal at the wrong moment.

Besides, he told himself fiercely as he paced the living - room at past four o'clock, questions weren't necessary. Not to Brenda, at least. What he planned - -

Well, in what he planned, he could not even tell Dr. Fell until afterwards. He must act on his own; if the whole experiment blew up in his face, there would still be no harm done except to himself.

It was past five o'clock when an odd, uncanny silence about the house roused him from his pacing and pondering.

The whisper of the rain had ceased. In a dull, vapourish kind of world, with water still gurgling and dripping from eaves, there was a hint that the sun might yet be out. It was stuffily warm in the hall when Mark took up the phone.

Before ringing the number of the person he wanted, Mark dialled another number first. There was one question he must ask; its answer should be his omen, his portent. And the answer, as he had expected, was yes. Without further delay Mark dialled the number he had wanted from the beginning.

'Can you possibly manage to meet me,' he asked, after the formalities, 'at eight o'clock tonight?'

He listened hard for the inflection of the reply. The familiar voice, sounding strange and unnatural now he knew what that person had done, asked why.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you. Not on the phone. It's far too important. But, if I promise to explain how the sealed - room

trick was worked, will you meet me?'

'Where?'

Mark was about to say, 'The bungalow'. It was fitting that the meeting should take place there, with a dead woman's ghost for company. Then he remembered the police, ever - present if unseen, always hovering near that cottage for whatever inscrutable reason.

But, it suddenly occurred to him, there was a better place.

'It can't be here,' Mark explained, 'because Brenda will be about. For obvious reasons it can't be at your own house. Meet me at Judith Walker's house - - No, no! She went away early this afternoon; she won't be back for several days. And I'm not intruding, either.'

'Are you sure she's not there? She has gone.'

'She has gone,' replied Mark, clearing a thickness out of his throat and with his pulses beginning to hammer. 'She left the key under the mat; and I'm to phone her at any time past six. Will you be there?'

'You then explain to me,' the voice said, 'how the room was locked up?'

'Yes!'

'Eight o'clock,' said the voice.

'Eight o'clock!' returned Mark, and rang off.

Only indistinctly, with his whole mind concentrated on listening, had Mark heard the front door close. Up in front of him loomed Dr. Fell, with rain - spatters on his black alpaca suit, his heavy hair, even his moustache. And Dr. Fell's voice sounded with muffled thunder.

'Sir, what are you doing?'

Mark put the phone jangling on its cradle.

'I might ask you the same question.'

'I have been trying, as I have tried from the first, to avert a useless and hideous tragedy.'

'Is there any danger of another tragedy?'

'Much!' said Dr. Fell.

Mark, shutting his fists, led the way into the living - room.

'To be brief,' continued Dr. Fell, after wheezing hard, 'I have been talking (oh, very casually!) with all the people concerned in this matter. For instance, I had a word with Mrs. Walker before, apparently, she left for Richmond. . . .'

""Apparently?"" Mark repeated.

'Did I say that? It must have been because, like the late Henry James, we qualify every statement in case it should be in danger of meaning too much.'

'Is there any other reason?' asked Mark. 'Last night you sent me running across the road when Judith Walker screamed. I still don't know what ailed her. But you never asked me afterwards what was the matter, or asked any question.'

'It was not necessary,' replied Dr. Fell. ' You see, I learned in the meantime.'

'Did Dr. Kent learn too?'

Both of them - and both knew it - spoke in phrases deliberately cryptic. They fenced, striking and guarding, each to discover what the other knew.

Dr. Fell studied him, withdrawn and more than a little sinister.

'Will my generation, I wonder, ever understand yours? Or yours understand mine? Archons of Athens!' And Dr. Fell

puffed out his cheeks. 'I make such a trite reflection, sir, because this morning I spent an hour or two at Sam Kent's home. I met his wife, his daughter, his son, even his dog. . . .'

'Yes?'

'And I might remark,' pursued Dr. Fell, 'that we did not sit in his library, as I had expected. We sat in what he calls his "workshop", a very dry and commodious cellar: a place for the noble art of messing about rather than actually making or repairing anything useful. Have you seen that workshop?'

'Many times.'

'Then you will know, I think, that it contains the litter of three junk - yards and of the Arabian Nights?'

'Yes,' Mark retorted. 'It also contains a number of files, both large and small.'

Dr. Fell was standing by the coffee - table, in front of the white - covered sofa in the window - bay. From his pocket he had taken a cigar, in a gaudy label, with a cellophane wrapper. Dr. Fell tore off the cellophane, with a sharp wrench, before he raised his several chins.

'Ah!' he said. 'I see you have been paying close attention to the notes of William Wilkie Collins, and to the letter to Charles Dickens.'

'Haven't you?'

'Yes, by thunder! And I might point out that anyone has access to a collection of sharp steel files. Let me repeat: anyone.'

'I agree,' said Mark.

Figuratively speaking, the clink of foils had grown faster.

'Nor did I mention this fact,' intoned Dr. Fell, 'to draw attention towards any item in the junk - yard or dustbin or

what you will. I did so to stress, to emphasize, the sad truth that never, never will one generation understand another. Why, sir, consider your friend Toby Saunders!'

'Toby? What about him?'

'Dr. Saunders arrived while Sam and I, engaged as usual in philosophical discourse, were turning over the litter. He joined us, and unearthed a couple of revolvers.'

'Revolvers?' Mark exclaimed.

Dr. Fell made a gesture with the cigar.

'Again I beg of you not to misunderstand! They were old Webleys, British service - revolvers, relics of Sam's days as a subaltern in World War One. Did Toby Saunders even guess Sam had served in that war, much less won the M.C. and the D.S.O.? He did not. Toby Saunders's instant fear, quite genuine and a little panicky - -'

'Fear, did you say?'

'I did. His fear was that Sam, in some fit of absent - mindedness, would turn a gun on his own head or wipe out his whole family. So little, so very little, did he understand a man not twenty years older than himself! So he must carry away the weapons, with some boxes of ammunition untouched since 1917.'

'Dr. Fell, what's the point of all this?'

'In his opinion,' said Dr. Fell, 'Sam Kent was not fit to be trusted with firearms. Very well! Is Toby Saunders, the somewhat excitable, himself fit to be trusted with them?'

Mark laughed, without much amusement.

'You were also right,' Mark pointed out, 'to say your generation failed to understand ours. Especially Toby Saunders.'

'Sir, will you be good enough to answer my question?'

'Then the answer is: yes, Toby can very much be trusted. If it's any kind of firearm, he can take it apart and put it together again with his eyes shut. Also with a Colt - 38 he can hit a dime at ten yards and a quarter at twenty.'

There was a sharp rasp as Dr. Fell, who had picked up the silver table - lighter from the coffee - table, snapped on its flame. He lit the cigar and blew out a cloud of smoke.

'Let us hope,' he said, 'it will not come to that.'

'Come to what?'

'Shooting,' answered Dr. Fell. 'To continue the hints I have been giving you, I would call your attention to Dr. Arnold Hewitt, the Master of Queen's. I had the pleasure of lunching with him today, and I made several significant discoveries. Kindly remember that we have many problems in this affair. How was the room locked up? That is one. Why was the body moved from the armchair to the dressing - table? That is another. What are the two sides to the crime which must be made to fit and integrate? That is still a third. But all these are centred round one image, the murderer, and one grisly question: who stabbed Rose Lestrangle?'

Here Dr. Fell inhaled deeply and blew out smoke.

'Do I tell you, in effect, that the earth is round and Queen Anne is dead?'

'Something like that, yes.'

'But it is necessary to do so. Now Dr. Hewitt - -'

'You're not saying he killed her?' Mark interrupted.

'Not necessarily,' said Dr. Fell. 'But how does he figure in the matter? Nothing has happened at random; nothing is fortuitous. There is still another person, too, whose important

role in the case you have not fully appreciated.'

'Oh, what person is that?'

'Frank Chadwick.'

Very softly, not on tiptoe but making no sound, Brenda slipped in beneath the open archway and stood with her back to the wall.

She must have returned from shopping, put the car away, and entered by the back door. Dressed in blue, subdued, her eyes avoiding Mark's yet constantly seeking them too, Brenda listened and waited.

Dr. Fell did not see her.

'Today, I hear,' he continued, making a hideous face, 'Chadwick was in Queenshaven again. Archons of Athens! Why? For that matter, why was he there yesterday?'

'I wish I knew,' Mark said honestly.

'Yesterday, when we were at the College Inn, he invited you out for a conference. Afterwards, you gave me an account of what he said to you. He told you nearly everything I hoped to hear, except his reason for coming to Queenshaven. But what he did say, by thunder, is worth remembering!'

'Steady, now!' insisted Mark, more for Brenda's benefit than for Dr. Fell's. 'I admit I'd like to see that young man get a lesson in what's what. But he's no fool; he's too careful of his own skin ever to let himself be a fool. Consequently, he'd never have dared lie about his alibi for the night of the murder.'

'Need he have lied about it?'

'What's that?'

'Need he have lied about it?' repeated Dr. Fell. 'Come, sir! Consider! The actual time of the murder . . .'

For the first time Dr. Fell became aware of Brenda.

'Ma'am,' he said, all volcano - rumblings ceasing during a guilty pause, 'I am a most intolerable nuisance.'

'But you aren't!' Brenda assured him, in all sincerity. 'It was only - I wanted to tell you dinner will be at seven o'clock, if that suits you?'

'Mrs. Ruthven,' and Dr. Fell spoke after another pause, 'I am not of a bodily shape ever to be a skeleton at a feast. Nevertheless, if you will accept my apologies, I must be a skeleton after dinner. Hang it all! I have just remembered I have an appointment at eight o'clock. And I have ordered a taxi.'

'A taxi? Why ever did you do that? The car's here; Mark can take you anywhere you like!'

'That's the trouble,' Mark intervened, 'I can't. I have an appointment at eight o'clock, too - - Dr. Fell, where are you going?'

'To Alexandria. And you?'

'Only to Judith Walker's house. I must - must meet somebody there.'

He saw Brenda's face, correctly read its expression, and hastened to explain as far as he dared.

'No, not to meet Judith! She's away. Brenda, try not to ask any questions yet! What I'm doing is mainly done for your own sake.'

'I wasn't going to ask any questions. I won't ever again, if you say not to! But it's not likely to be a very cheerful dinner, is it?'

It was not. As a rule the only thing Dr. Fell likes better than eating and drinking is to talk. But, when he kept directing

uneasy glances at Mark, he failed at all three; and so did his host.

Nor was the meal improved by Miss Sweet. Though an admirable cook, she had a habit of singing lugubrious hymns in the kitchen. Even a triumphant hymn was made bloodcurdling. When ten thousand times ten thousand swarmed up the steep of light. Miss Sweet's soft, wicked soprano made them seem to be racing headlong in the other direction.

Mrs. Partridge, usually steady in waiting at table, juggled dishes and dropped one. Brenda was almost in tears. It came as a relief when a Yellow cab splashed up and hooted its horn outside.

'Sir,' intoned Dr. Fell, surging up behind the table, 'I am keeping my own destination a secret. Therefore, I can't presume to advise or even question you about your own mission. But, if you are doing what I think you are doing . . .'

'Yes?'

'Then take care. I beg of you to take care!'

'What's the matter with you?' demanded Mark, after a quick look at Brenda. 'How many times must I say it? There isn't any danger at all.'

'To yourself, no.' Dr. Fell threw down his napkin. 'To someone else: ah, that is a different matter! And I may see you sooner than you think.'

The cab hooted again. The singing from the kitchen, above a clatter of pots and pans put away in cupboards, soared upon an eldritch note of, 'Christian, up and smite them'. That was the state of matters when Mark, with Brenda looking out of a window after him, departed soon after Dr. Fell.

He was early. But he had another errand to do first. In Harley Lane, passing the Walkers' house, he went straight to the

bungalow.

If anyone lurked about that cottage, Mark saw no sign of it. Still the front door was unlocked. It was the first time he had been there alone, but he did not remain long. Going only as far as the bedroom, he found what he sought, put it into his pocket, and hurried out again.

The rain had ceased long ago. But drenched grass, drenched trees still exhaled a damp warmth which turned Mark's skin clammy. Even the dark asphalt road had not quite dried. Towards the west, partly behind the bungalow, glowed the beginning of a pinkish - coloured sunset. Mark went on towards Judith Walker's.

He stopped in the road in front of the house.

A car - an all - too - familiar car - was parked there.

He had seen it when he passed this house on his way to the bungalow. The person he had summoned, clearly, was earlier than himself at the rendezvous.

And again, the person he had summoned knew Judith Walker's habit of leaving the key to the front door under the doormat.

There was nobody in the car, nobody in the front garden which had once been a tavern - yard. The person he came to meet must be inside the house.

Standing beside that parked car, Mark debated what he would say and how he must say it. He was turning over phrases in his mind when his gaze wandered through the front window of the car, and to the seat beside the driver's.

What he saw lying there, as though carefully put down when the driver had got out, made him hurry round and open the door of the car. He picked up the two heavy objects, examined each of them, and put them back.

'Here!' Mark said aloud - and slammed the door of the car.

Its noise was loud as it slammed. All Dr. Fell's warnings came back to him, though he couldn't and wouldn't believe them.

A broad brick path, with a bright flower - garden on either side, ran for more than sixty feet to the front door of the long, low house in dark brick. He walked slowly up the path, past the point where (once upon a time) had stood the sign of the 'George' until it was torn down years before the Revolution.

Judith, when she went away, must have forgotten to close the windows. Again, standing before the house as he had stood before it last night, he heard the grandfather clock ticking inside.

The doormat was pushed to one side, the key gone. For a moment Mark thought he saw the twitch or flutter of a curtain at a small window upstairs. But that must have been illusion.

He did not trouble to ring the bell. He turned the knob, walked into the semi - dark lounge - hall, and stood still as though he were in the presence of an enemy rather than a friend. A chair creaked and cracked as someone sat up.

'Hello, Toby,' Mark said.

Toby Saunders, whose face he could see only dimly, rose to his feet.

'All right!' Toby answered in a repressed voice. 'What's all the mystery? What's all the higher hocus - pocus? What have you got to tell me?'

'No!' said Mark. 'What have you got to tell me?'

'Tell you?'

'Yes. I know you took those Webley revolvers from Sam Kent's.' Mark paused. 'But why are they on the front seat of your car now? And why are they both loaded?'

'DID you bring me all the way here just to ask about those guns?'

'Why did you load them, Toby?'

'Hell, how should I know? Force of habit, I guess.'

'Was that all?'

'Yes! Look!' Toby spoke in a deep, harsh breath. ' I took the guns from the old man this morning. I took 'em home and cleaned 'em. They were in pretty good shape, considering how little service they've had in nearly thirty years. That's all. Finish. No savvy any more. Get me?'

His sincerity was so strong that Mark, on this point at least, could no longer doubt him.

Mark left the front door open. Through the doorway a path of pinkish - coloured light from the sunset lay across bright rugs on a stone - flagged floor. The open windows were curtained; that glow was the only light.

Faintly it touched low tables with bowls of red carnations and white cosmos. Toby, shoulders back, stood close to one such table; you could see his hands when he gestured, but his face remained in shadow.

'Never mind the guns!' Toby said. 'What are we doing here? Why do we have to get together, all very hush - hush, in somebody else's house where no one can hear us?'

'That is the reason, Toby.'

'Eh?'

'This is between ourselves. Nobody else must hear what I'm going to tell you. And yet - and yet I don't see how I can keep it secret! Dr. Fell knows; that's plain from what he's said; and

the whole business seems bound to come out.'

'Will you tell me what in holy hell you're talking about?'

'Yes. If you, in turn, don't mind answering some questions.'

'What about?'

'About Sunday morning, just before and just after six - thirty, when we discovered Rose Lestrangle's body.'

The big clock ticked by the staircase. Toby, seeming to stand straighter, thrust his hands into his trousers pockets. The metal buckle of his belt gleamed in the pink light.

'While I was standing outside that bungalow,' Mark went on, 'you and Dr. Kent walked up out of the mist. Afterwards you said the two of you were going in to Queenshaven to get the Sunday papers. That was reasonable enough, even if it was an unholy early hour; Sunday papers aren't delivered here. But who suggested you should walk to Queenshaven for them?'

'Look, I told you that! Mrs. Kent wanted the old man out of the way and not trying to get his own breakfast. She suggested it.'

'Oh, no, she didn't.'

The pendulum of the clock beat twice.

'Mark, are you calling me a liar?'

'Yes. I've got to. Before I phoned you this afternoon, I rang Mrs. Kent and asked her.' Mark held up his hand quickly. 'Wait, Toby! Don't say anything yet! I should have seen the truth on Sunday evening, from something Caroline quite unintentionally told Judith and me in the library.'

Mark's hand was still held up. Toby's shoulders had grown tense.

'Caroline was only complaining about her mother's fussing,

that's all. "Even this morning, when Toby dragged father out to get the newspapers, my mother said that was wrong too." That was what Caroline told us; she never guessed it was important. But you suggested walking to Queenshaven, Toby. Mrs. Kent confirms it.'

'Now why in Satan's name should I suggest it?'

'Shall I tell you why?'

'Yes!'

'Because you had to have one witness, meaning Dr. Kent, when you passed the cottage at six - thirty. You could then point to the front door, which you had deliberately left wide open. You could cry out that something was wrong inside, and rush Dr. Kent in to investigate.'

Toby snatched his hands out of his pockets. Again he had begun to speak when Mark cut him off.

'Wait, Toby! Unfortunately, that witness wasn't a safe one. Dr. Kent has a horror of invading people's privacy. He might never have rushed in merely because of a door left open and a lamp burning; he might have refused, as he nearly did later.

'So you had to have me there too. That was why you telephoned me from Dr. Kent's house, shortly before six - thirty. You spoke in a disguised voice, a deeper voice, and with a handkerchief over the mouthpiece -'

Toby flung up one hand. 'Mark, you're crazy!'

'No! Will you listen?'

'I - -'

'And, as the mysterious voice, you gabbled some words intended to mean that Rose Lestrangle had killed herself. They brought me over to the bungalow in a hurry, as you hoped they would. Again unfortunately, because of a dream, I

misunderstood what was said. And so afterwards you had to keep shouting that it was suicide, suicide, suicide.'

Mark took a step forward towards the table.

'You did all that, Toby, because you had to "discover" the body. You had to have witnesses. You had to have people there when the locked room was unlocked, or your whole scheme could never have succeeded.'

'You damn fool!' Toby shouted. 'Are you saying I killed the woman?'

'No!'

'Then what's the game? What are you saying?'

'Do you think I enjoy saying it? Do you think I don't know you were only trying to help me?'

The hot, moist air was thick with the scent of flowers in the bowl on the table. Mark felt a bead of sweat run down his forehead.

'Listen again, Toby! Go back to the night of the murder! About an hour before that woman was stabbed, you accused her to her face of being the joker of the gymnasium. Do you deny you did?'

'No! Why should I? Rose was the joker of the gymnasium.'

'Oh, no, she wasn't.'

'Look, Mark - -!'

'It's the truth. The woman you call our Rose was as vicious as a cobra. She loved sharp steel; and she died by it. But she wasn't the joker of the gym. That's the whole point of the crime.'

'I tell you, you're crazy. She was - -!'

'You thought she was the joker, yes. You honestly believed it.

And what happened, after you'd driven back to Dr. Kent's at half - past eleven? Dr. Arnold Hewitt was there. He kept you and Dr. Kent awake and talking until one o'clock. That's his part in the business: you were so late you spent the night at Dr. Kent's. And your conscience pounced on you as it always does. Isn't that true?'

'I spent the night there, yes! I told you so!'

'And what else?'

Toby suddenly took a step backwards.

'You couldn't sleep,' Mark said. 'You had the horrors for fear you'd overdone it when you pitched into Rose. Suppose she was in a mood to kill herself? Suppose she did kill herself, and it was your fault?'

'And so, at three or four o'clock in the morning, you got up and dressed. You went back on foot to the bungalow, to see if you couldn't put things right. What you found there was far worst than suicide, wasn't it?'

'You found her lying back dead in the easy - chair. She was wearing only a wrap and slippers; there was a blood - stained book at her feet. She had been stabbed in a way that couldn't have been suicide, but only murder.'

'For some reason, Toby, you think you owe a great debt of gratitude to me. I don't know why, but that's what you think. You wouldn't let this be murder. You were going to protect Brenda at any cost. So you arranged all the trappings to suggest suicide after all. Before we go any further, tell me! Isn't that what you did and why you did it?'

Toby drew a deep, harsh breath.

'Yes!' he said. 'And, what's more, I'd do it again. Believe it or not, the only person I hated deceiving was you.'

'All the trappings, Toby? Including Wilkie Collins's trick for

locking up the room?'

'I don't know what you mean by "his" trick. You showed me an old fan - beard's material nearly a year ago, whether you remember it or not. I may have got a hint or two. But it was my trick, thanks. And don't worry, Mark: the cops will never guess it in a million years.'

'That's where you're wrong. It's too simple, once they do see it. If I hadn't been so flustered, I might have guessed for myself on Sunday morning.'

'Mark, don't kid yourself! You were the first person who ran into that bungalow on Sunday morning, after you'd made certain outside the windows were locked. You knelt down and looked through the keyhole. And you saw the key turned in the lock, didn't you?'

'I saw a key, yes.'

'A key?'

'That's what I said, Toby.'

'Well, what difference does it make?' the other demanded. 'There's only one key that will fit the bedroom door. It's hard to turn in the lock, and it wasn't tampered with. That's as true as gospel, isn't it?'

'Yes! It's perfectly true as far as it goes. This key!'

Reaching into his pocket. Mark drew out a metal object and threw it on the table beside the flower - bowl. It tingled and tinkled there. It was faintly rust - discoloured, gleaming in the broad pink light through the doorway.

'That's the key to the bedroom door,' Mark pointed. 'I got it from the bungalow only a little while ago. Look at it!'

'Well? What about it?'

'Like most keys of circa 1920, it has a perfectly straight stem. No humps or bulges. The head is just the same size as the flange. Of course we knew that from the beginning. Otherwise, following your instructions, I couldn't have used the eraser - end of a pencil and pushed it through the lock.

'Do you remember, Toby, that you directed all operations? You got down on your knees in front of a locked door, and pushed one end of a magazine under the door. While I prodded a certain key through the lock, so that it fell on the paper inside, you drew the paper back with your hand down to guard it. Then what did you do?'

'I handed you the key!'

'What did you do before? You picked up the key I had seen in the lock. You stood up straight. You drew a deep breath. You struck your right fist into the palm of your left hand, like this!'

Mark struck his own fist into his palm, holding his hands together for a second before he dropped them.

'It was then, and only then, you handed me the key and said, "Open it". That was the trick, Toby. That was the change - over. The key you handed me was the real key, and one on the table now. It wasn't the same key I had seen in the lock.'

Mark paused.

'In short, Toby,' he said, 'the key in the lock was a dummy.'

'But it couldn't have been! It wouldn't have fitted there, and you'd have seen it was a fake when you prodded it through!'

'On the contrary. Almost any key of nearly the same size would have done - if you'd doctored it properly beforehand. Let me show you how you did it.'

Mark picked up the key from the table. He held it up against the light. He ran his thumb along the stem of the key from the head to the flange, so that his thumb blotted the flange out of

sight.

'Let's suppose you've got an extra key! The key of the drawing - room at the bungalow, for instance, is missing now. I know it's missing; last night I saw light blaze through the keyhole when the lamps were turned on.

'You've also got access to a number of steel files from Dr. Kent's workshop. The amount of doctoring may take an hour, you may sweat a little; but it's a steel file against thin, soft iron.

'All you do is cut through the stem of the key just beside the flange. The flange drops off. What you've got left is the head of the key attached to its stem.

'Then it's simpler still. You walk outside; you close the door; you lock it from outside with the real key. Through the keyhole, from outside, you push the dummy key into the lock and leave it there. If anyone looks through the keyhole from outside, he can't see there's no flange; the head of the key obscures the other end.

Seen outside or inside, through windows, it cannot be detected." Of course it can't; from both sides it looks like a real key. A certain letter, written over eighty years ago, carefully states the windows have been locked on the inside; but just as carefully refrains from saying the door has been locked on the inside too.'

Again Mark paused. Again he threw the key on the table, where it tinkled and rang.

'That's what you did, Toby. The real key was in your left hand when you pulled the dummy key under the door. Your right hand guarded any appearance of a flangeless stem. And you changed keys, that's all. Do you admit it now?'

'No!' said Toby, in so strange a voice that Mark jumped.

'But you admit the other things?'

'No!'

'Toby, I'm not trying to get you into trouble; I'm trying to get you out! The police know this was murder.'

'The police, eh? You don't say so!'

'Yes. They've known since the beginning. We learned everything, now, except the name of the real murderer - -'

'But we don't know that, do we?' said Toby, in that same wild and unearthly voice. 'No, by God! We're very clever, but we don't know that!'

'Toby, what's wrong with you?'

Then Toby's voice struck him like a blow in the face.

'You fool,' Toby said.

And he jumped behind the table and the flower - bowl. And at last, in the pink light streaming through the open doorway, Mark saw his face.

'You fool!' Toby repeated. 'Do you want to see your own wife arrested for the murder? Brenda killed our Rose and you'd better hear it now.'

There are some blows so unexpected that they leave only a blankness. They linger until the mental breath returns, as Mark's returned now.

'You're not going back to that nonsense, are you?'

'Going back to it? We were never away from it!'

'Toby, are you crazy?'

'Oho! Where have I heard that one before? Look, Mark: how much do you really know about this business? Have the cops been after you?'

'No; they haven't even questioned me.'

'Well, they've questioned me to a fare - ye - well. At just what time, in your all - conquering knowledge, do you think Rose was killed?'

'According to Dr. Fell, it was half - past twelve or even earlier. But it can't have been much earlier; the medical evidence puts half - past twelve as the outside limit of time.'

'Oh, crikey!' yelled Toby, and then controlled himself. 'That's the "official" verdict. The one thing you can't pin down is the time; no medical officer will swear to it or can swear to it. Rose was killed, the cops think, at midnight or as soon after as makes no difference. Where was Brenda at midnight?'

'She was - -'

'Where was Brenda at midnight?'

Mark conquered a shakiness in his legs and in his throat.

'She was outside the bungalow. But she was twenty - odd feet away, and she got into her car immediately and drove off. She didn't go a step nearer than that!'

'Is that what she told you?'

'Toby, are you - -'

'Answer me! Is that what Brenda told you?'

'Yes! And it's the truth!'

Toby reached slowly into his pocket, as Mark had reached for the key. He took out something coiled up like a very short tape - measure. It was made of cloth, and coloured scarlet. ...

One end of it whipped out, less scarlet than grey - black in the glow from the doorway, as Toby uncoiled it before dropping it on the table beside the key.

'Yes!' Toby did not speak loudly. 'It's the red cloth belt from the dress Brenda was wearing on the night of the murder. I wasn't sure how she'd lost it until I talked to Judith Walker on Sunday morning. But Brenda's been driving a car too.'

Toby's face, thin and pale, showed only savage compassion.

'Draw your own conclusions. Mark. I found this belt in the bungalow, at two o'clock in the morning, on the floor just outside the bedroom where Rose was stabbed at shortly past midnight.'

Mark made no answer.

He looked at the belt on the table. He looked back at Toby, who hesitated and then burst out.

'Your reconstruction of my conduct,' he said, 'was pretty accurate. I found Rose dead: you bet I did! It was two o'clock, not three or four; but never mind that. I could see she'd been killed in the armchair, while she was reading. So I moved her body to the dressing - table, where nobody could have killed her but herself. Do you want to know what else I did?'

'Stop this, Toby! Stop it!'

'Why should I stop? You wanted to hear about it, didn't you?'

'Yes, but . . .'

'I fastened her fingers around the handle of the dagger.' Toby swallowed. 'Rigor was setting in, and it locked the fingers there. I ran back to Sam Kent's after a file, and cut the flange off the drawing - room key for my locked - room trick. It was past four o'clock before I could get into your house and change Armadale for The Woman in White. I did all that? Sure I did! What else, in decency, could I have done?' Toby put up a hand to his collar, tugging at it. 'But I'm not going to confess in public, thanks,' he added. 'You ought to be the last man who'd want me to. Can't you rally around and help Brenda? Get some ideas! If they do suspect her, it's all up once they learn the

explanation of that locked room.'

Mark whipped round. 'Wait!' he said sharply. He was looking straight out of the open doorway down the broad brick path to Harley Lane. Bright flower - beds lay on either side, tinged by the bright sunset; and, towards the right, there was a driveway to the garage. A police - car was backing round in that driveway. Somebody, at the wheel of the car, said something inaudible to the person who had just climbed out of the car. The person who had climbed out was Dr. Gideon Fell. Toby hurried to join Mark in the doorway. Together they watched Dr. Fell walk slowly up the brick path towards the house, while the police - car swung to the right into Harley Lane and sped towards Queenshaven. Dr. Fell's bulk was outlined dark against the sunset; yet all too clearly they could discern the expression on his face. It might mean doom or disaster; certainly it meant doubt and alarm.

'Oh, ah!' declared Dr. Fell, opening the screen - door. 'You may be correct, gentlemen, in any assumptions you make. The man in that car was Lieutenant Walter Henderson. We have been having a heart - to - heart talk for some time.'

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MARK and Toby spoke together.

'Brenda - - ' Mark began.

'The locked room - - ' said Toby.

Both of them paused as Dr. Fell, looming up inside, let the screen - door bang lightly behind him. Blinking over the lopsided eyeglasses, he peered to the left, saw an electric switch, and pressed it down.

The soft glow of three table - lamps lit the old room with its deep fireplace and its ticking clock. Dr. Fell glanced quickly towards the staircase, as though he half expected Judith Walker to be there.

While tension mounted in Mark, and Toby seemed to feel the same, Dr. Fell's rather grim scrutiny passed to the table on which lay the belt front Brenda's dress as well as the key to the bedroom door.

'Ah!' breathed Dr. Fell, and did not need to explain further.

'Have you been to the police?' Mark asked.

'On the contrary.' Dr. Fell spoke with a kind of ferocious affability. 'The police, in the person of Lieutenant Henderson, very much came to me. This afternoon I received an invitation to his office. That is where I have been. I did not know that any small exploits of mine had been heard of here. Over a cigar and several cans of beer, at Mr. Henderson's office, I (harrumph!) learned a thing or two.

'If I had a high opinion of Mr. Henderson's intelligence before I met him, I have an even higher one now. I must tell you both, here and now, that nearly everything you know is also known to the police. We are nearing the kill, and approaching the identity of the real murderer.'

'But how could they have learned - -?' Mark was beginning. What he meant was how could they have learned anything about Brenda, and how they could conceivably have heard an explanation of the locked room.

'How could they have learned many things?' inquired Dr. Fell. 'My dear sir, the gossip of Queen's College and of the Lawn was common gossip in Queenshaven; it would not be difficult for the police to sort it out. Furthermore, with open doors and windows everywhere in this heat, they have had listening posts everywhere. Surely you remember last night?'

'You mean the man under the tree outside the bungalow? When Judith Walker screamed, and you sent me across here to investigate?'

'I do,' said Dr. Fell.

'But I didn't discover anything!'

'I discovered something, however.' Dr. Fell puffed out his cheeks. 'While you were in this house last night, Lieutenant Henderson dropped in to see me at the bungalow.'

'Didn't you say you met him this afternoon?'

'No, by thunder! I said I was invited to his office this afternoon. But the light of his countenance shone in the bungalow last night, while Sam Kent and I were debating. Lieutenant Henderson appeared only briefly. He persuaded Sam to go while he had a word with me. He apologized for the fact that one of his men, keeping watch outside the cottage, had frightened Mrs. Walker. . . .'

'Frightened Judith? How?'

'Oh, my dear sir!' Again Dr. Fell puffed out his cheeks in a vast breath. 'The lady screamed, you recall? She was in a haze of opiates; but she is constitutionally nervous and a trifle unstable from insomnia. When she looked out of a window here,' he pointed to it, 'and saw a sinister figure crouching behind a tree near the street - lamp, are you surprised there was some reaction?'

'Maybe not; but - -'

'Mrs. Walker, I take it, is not here now?'

'No, of course not!' said Mark. 'There's nobody here except Toby and myself. Why should there be anybody here?'

'I wondered. That is all.'

Mark and Toby exchanged glances.

'Let us return,' continued Dr. Fell, 'to Mr. Henderson's brief appearance last night. I asked him whether he customarily used such kid - glove tactics as watching witnesses rather than (in the expressive phrase) grilling them. He said two things

impressive to one accustomed to the rigidity of the English law. He said, "In this case, we think it's better." He also said, "We believe in justice."

'Justice, by thunder!' said Dr. Fell, his face growing redder. 'It might have been a bluff. And yet I believed what he said. Thus tonight, when we discussed the identity of the murderer - -'

'Who is the murderer?' demanded Toby Saunders. 'I've got my own theory, yes; but I'm not going to say what it is. I'm only asking you.'

'Sir, you do not need to say what it is.' Dr. Fell spoke with suppressed violence. 'If you refer to Mrs. Ruthven - -'

'Toby does mean that,' Mark interrupted, as quietly as he could. 'I said before, and I still say, it's too fantastic to be believed. I know Brenda. I know she wouldn't, and couldn't have done a thing of that sort. And I have no hesitation about asking it. Is Brenda guilty?'

Dr. Fell struck the ferrule of one cane sharply on the stone floor.'

'No!' he replied. 'I promised you no harm should come to her, and I have kept that promise. I convinced the police she had nothing whatever to do with the matter. I did it at a cost. But it is done. Mrs. Ruthven is not guilty of murder. She is guilty only of . . .'

'Of what?'

'Of being ashamed. Ashamed she went anywhere near Rose Lestrangle. Ashamed, I suspect, she went as far as entering that cottage before she turned and ran. If you failed to see that very clearly, from her behaviour at the bungalow last night, you do not understand her as well as you think.'

Mark had already started towards the door.

'No!' said Dr. Fell. 'You wish to go to her now? You have been

wrapped up in academic problems, and in danger of forgetting her too often? That is your secret? Very well! But you must not go just yet.'

If the sky outside had not been so clear, growing red rather than pink and seeming brighter instead of darker. Mark would have thought a storm was on its way.

Dr. Fell turned to Toby.

'It is you, sir, whom I ask to go. In fact, I entreat you to go.'

'Me?' blurted Toby, and retreated towards the table. ' Why me?'

'Sir, don't you feel it?'

'I'm not dumb,' Toby retorted, his hand going up to his collar. 'If you mean there'll be a revelation before many minutes, and we'll hear who the murderer is, I can catch atmospheres as well as the next man. But why should I go?'

'Because, when it happens, there must be only two persons present beside myself. One is Mark Ruthven. The other is a man whom I expect here very shortly.'

'The murderer?'

'Sir,' said Dr. Fell, 'you have been a good friend and a staunch ally. With that locked - room device you protected your friend's wife even when you believed (and may still believe!) she was guilty of murder. Therefore - -'

Toby's fierce gesture cut him off.

'By the Lord Harry, I've been afraid of you ever since I met you at the old man's house this morning! I was afraid of your reputation before then. Have you solved the locked - room trick?'

'Yes,' said Dr. Fell.

'But have the police solved it?'

'Sir, there is a reason why I cannot answer that question now. Let me only repeat that in a few minutes I am expecting a man,' he hesitated, 'with whom you are acquainted. Therefore go! Even if you don't understand my request, even if you think it insane or fantastic, go away now!'

Toby went. He turned round once, tense and strangely tragic - looking against the glowing sky. Then his car rolled away towards College Avenue.

Dr. Fell, staring after it, uttered a low - voiced curse.

'He is driving straight to apologize to your wife,' Dr. Fell said to Mark. 'Archons of Athens! He is going in the wrong direction.'

'Does it matter in which direction he goes?'

'Yes!'

'What is the real reason why you don't want him here?'

'Toby Saunders, my good sir, is too idealistic. At the moment he is technically accessory after the fact in a murder case; and it does not trouble him at all. In what he believes to be a good cause (haven't you seen it?), he will run any danger and take any hair - raising risk. And yet - and yet - -!'

'What?'

'Several times in this affair you have referred to him as a Puritan. To me that seemed a strange term, both historically and geographically, to apply to any Virginian. But I quite understand what you meant; and what you meant is true. He could easily condone it, for instance, when he believed you were having an affair with Rose Lestrangle. Could he so easily have condoned it, on the other hand, if he had believed your wife was having an affair with Frank Chadwick?'

Mark whirled round from the doorway.

'Brenda and Chadwick?' he repeated. 'Are you turning the tables again? Are you saying . . .?'

'Yes?'

'Never mind! Let's have Toby's own question. Dr. Fell, who is the murderer?'

'I am going to tell you now,' said Dr. Fell.

With a vacant - looking nod, as though fathoms deep in meditation, Dr. Fell wandered over to the sofa and sat down. There he sat motionless, chins lowered, for what seemed a very long time.

Presently he raised his head.

'Sir, you have been forgetting. With so many other distractions, locked rooms and substituted books, you have neglected what I swore to you was the root, the core, the central mystery of all.

'Who was the joker of the gymnasium, and why were those apparently senseless antics performed? The antics, believe me, were far from senseless. Sam Kent was right in one way. There was a real reason, if a frantic and desperate reason, for every act.

'It is extraordinary that you of all people should have neglected or forgotten this! You yourself guessed one - third of the truth on Saturday night, when Toby Saunders first told you the story of the gymnasium. On Sunday night, Mrs. Walker told you the second part of the truth. And last night, when I was there, you seized on the third and last part.

'Indeed, you came so close to complete truth that my hair stood on end. Reflect, now!'

'When Toby Saunders first told you about it, and asked you

why anyone should have performed the so - called antics, what did you reply?'

It was not a rhetorical question. Dr. Fell's eyes were fixed on Mark, intent and waiting.

'I said,' Mark answered, 'that the joker's malice couldn't have been directed towards George or Hubert Johnson, and we mustn't look for a motive there. I said it was as though the joker were deliberately calling our attention to the gym, centering and directing our thoughts there.'

'Aha! "Deliberately calling our attention to the gym, centering and directing our thoughts there." Those words, or words very like them?'

'Yes! But I don't see - -'

'Stop!' said Dr. Fell. 'Now imagine it is Sunday night again, and again you are meeting Judith Walker at the side - door of the New Library. A book falls from a shelf just inside the door. Mrs. Walker is frightened, and says there is somebody in the library. You try to reassure her, wondering why she is frightened. You ask her whether she has heard the story about the events in the gymnasium. When you asked her that, what did she say?'

Mark's mind travelled back to a scene very vivid in his memory.

'She said she had heard. She said -'

'Sir, emphasize her words! Clearly, now!'

'She said, "Silly pictures of the Founder's statue in luminous paint! Silly tricks to frighten a poor old man and a sixteen - year - old boy! Mrs. Hewitt and Mrs. Kent and Mrs. Mason can't talk or think of anything else!"'

'Good! Excellent! Then, just afterwards, you have quoted Judith Walker as using very significant words. What did she

say then?'

"It's done one good thing, though," Judith said. "They've all completely forgotten Rose LeStrange and that young man using the infirmary as - -"

'As what? What did she mean?'

'She meant using the infirmary as a place of assignation for what we'll politely call a love - affair.'

'Put those two pieces of information together. "It's as though someone were deliberately calling out attention to the gym, directing our thoughts there." Why was it done? What result was achieved? "Mrs. Hewitt and Mrs. Kent and Mrs. Mason can't talk or think of anything else. They've completely forgotten Rose LeStrange and that young man using the infirmary as a place to meet." Does light begin to dawn?'

'Yes!' said Mark. 'In other words, what happened at the gym was a desperate and frantic effort to draw attention away from what had happened at the infirmary? And hide a love - affair that threatened scandal?'

'I mean just that.'

'Then surely - -?'

'Then surely, you were about to say, the joker of the gymnasium must have been very desperate?' asked Dr. Fell. 'You are right. The joker of the gymnasium afterwards committed a real murder.'

Dr. Fell, wheezing slowly, raised his hand as though for silence.

'Let me recapitulate the situation,' he suggested, 'as it seemed to me when Sam Kent twice telephoned me in New York, before I had arrived there. A certain young man and a certain woman were revelling in what, as you say, we politely call a love - affair.'

'The young man, as we know (he has never denied it, even to you) was Frank Chadwick. Who was the woman? According to two witnesses, who say they saw her opening the door of the infirmary with a key, she was Rose Lestrangle.'

'But that can' t be! That's where I baulk!'

'So?' Dr. Fell inquired gently.' Why won't you accept it?'

'Because, as I said last night - -!' Mark stopped abruptly.

'Ah! Then you are beginning to remember now?'

'More than beginning. I have remembered all along. Rose Lestrangle was . . . well, call her what you like. But she never had, and never wanted, any lover whatever! Her interest, all her life, was only in making trouble and laughing while her victims squirmed in agony. She didn't mind letting people think she was visiting the infirmary with a boy - friend. But she would never have gone there herself.'

'Exactly!'

'And therefore - - ' Mark stopped again.

'Therefore,' Dr. Fell's voice grew loud in the quiet room, 'either the two witnesses were deliberately lying when they identified Rose Lestrangle as the woman who kept tryst at the infirmary. Or else those two witnesses, honestly mistaken, must have seen someone else.'

Mark twitched his head round. He thought he could hear the hum of a car in the lane, but he was wrong, and he turned back.

'It is almost certain, then,' pursued Dr. Fell, 'that the witnesses were mistaken. Some unknown woman, not Rose Lestrangle at all, has plunged headlong into an intrigue with Chadwick.'

'In trying to determine who this woman is, we have several indications. Why do these two continue to meet at the

infirmary? Why there, of all outlandish places, since Chadwick has a convenient and much - used apartment in Washington?

'It must have been at the woman's insistence. She cannot, she dares not, go anywhere else: which is curious in itself. She has the key; therefore she is someone closely connected with the college. She is a woman of strongly sensual temperament, for the affair to go on under such grotesque conditions. Yet she must (she must!) keep up an appearance of the greatest respectability.'

Mark spoke sharply.

'Come, now! You must have more indications than that?'

'Indications?' repeated Dr. Fell. 'My dear sir, we have more than that. I was only describing my own state of mind when I first arrived, and began to hear the other evidence.'

'It seemed to me that the joker of the gymnasium was also the murderer. And yet, at first glance, the details of the murder would not fit into this conception. The behaviour of the joker had been crude and slap - dash, as though influenced by the sort of thriller we used to call a blood. The behaviour of the murderer had been a piece of academic subtlety, totally different.'

'This appeared to put my theory out of court. There were two sides which would not fit or integrate. Unless . . .

'Unless, it occurred to me, at the College Inn, there were two persons concerned in the crime: but not as partners or conspirators. They could not have been partners or conspirators. Their techniques were too different.'

'The real murderer, as I had believed at the beginning, was the joker. The real murderer entered and stabbed and ran away. Someone else followed, hours later, and spun the academic web to baffle us with a false suicide. Considering what we have learned since, I scarcely need to labour the point. Toby Saunders, believing he was protecting his friend's wife, was

actually protecting someone else. Irony of ironies! But not the worst irony, by thunder, in this bitter comedy of murder.'

Dr. Fell had sat up. His big voice rang against the dark panelling and bright - jacketed books.

Mark regarded him warily.

'Dr. Fell, how long have you been certain of the murderer's identity?'

'Since early yesterday evening.'

'But late yesterday evening, at the bungalow, you said you didn't know! You said you hesitated between two persons!'

Again the big voice rose.

'I deliberately lied,' replied Dr. Fell. 'You and Sam Kent, between you, fired too dangerously close to truth. It has been evident, I hope, that in this investigation I have been suppressing truth rather than revealing it, except in such matters as would help us in our predicament with the police? When you learn why I did - -'

'Well, you might tell me.'

'It is another irony. I prophesied I might come out of this affair with little credit; I never suspected how little. I am an old campaigner, or so I thought. But Lieutenant Henderson completely outgeneralled me. Great Scott, didn't he!'

'How?'

'Sir, I do not think for one moment he really believed your wife was guilty. But there was a specious case against her. He might have made it out, if he had wished to. I dared not take that risk.

'And so, since I knew your wife was not guilty, he compelled me to reveal who was guilty. I was beaten. Tut, now, I beg you

not to wave your arms and swear! You must see these things for yourself. A certain man, as I told you, will be here at any moment - -'

'What man?'

'Frank Chadwick.'

'And always,' Mark thought, 'we return to that name!' But he said nothing.

'Now consider Frank Chadwick and the mysterious young woman, Miss X or Mrs. X, who has been having an affair with him. Chadwick himself, in the street outside the drugstore, swore to you that he had "had his lesson"; he swore that never again would he "lay hands on any faculty woman". Whereupon he laughed, and said he had "obliged for the last time ".

"That sneer of his gives us more evidence. This young woman is a "faculty woman"; in your own account of it, probably a wife. Chadwick has led her on; it has been a fine game for him; but now he laughs. She has more reasons than one for feeling terrified and trapped. What else can we deduce of her?'

'Possibly a lot. But it doesn't make sense!'

'Oh, ah? What doesn't?'

'Two witnesses,' replied Mark, 'mistook Mrs. X for Rose Lestrangle. Therefore she ought to have looked like Rose. But that's the trouble. There isn't any young woman here who looks in the least like Rose!'

'It depends on what you mean by "looks like" - instance, when did the witnesses see her?'

'Only at night. Of course!' Mark snapped his fingers. 'They could have judged only by her height and shape and the colour of her hair. But the same rule still applies. There isn't a . . .'

'One moment! Think of this woman's character and predicament too. She is at once sensual and inexperienced, fascinated and yet hating. Against her will, against her conscience, she has been drawn into a game which is an old one to Chadwick but terrifying to everything she holds dear.

'Gossip everywhere threatens her at the college. She can stifle this gossip only by another kind of sensation: half - grown - up actions, attempted murders which are not really attempted murders at all, and to her mind "harmless". Think of all this - and then think of Judith Walker.'

To Mark it seemed that the same universe was cracking across.

'Judith Walker?'

'Yes. Ask yourself again the question which has been so persistent a source of trouble. What could Mrs. Walker have seen in the library on Sunday night?'

'You mean, what frightened her?'

'No!' thundered Dr. Fell, and rapped the ferrule of his cane on the floor. 'Have we any actual reason to suppose she collapsed because she was frightened? For instance, has Mrs. Walker herself ever said so?'

'No; but we must assume . . .'

'Sir, I had rather we assumed nothing. A few minutes before she collapsed, admittedly, she had been very frightened when a plaster bust was flung at her head by a tramp, a would - be sneak - thief, who has since been nabbed by the police and who has told everything he knew,'

'A sneak - thief?' Mark exclaimed. 'Then the disturbance in the library actually has nothing to do with the case?'

'On the contrary! It has everything to do with the case, except that you have persisted in misunderstanding it. What did Mrs. Walker see? There was nothing in the stack - room, nothing in

the library except what any person there could have observed. She saw only you, opening the door of the stack - room, and Miss Kent holding out a key towards the door. Very well! Why should she have been affected by that?'

'You're saying, in other words, that she lied? That Judith Walker was the joker of the gymnasium and also the murderer?'

'No! I am saying nothing of the kind!'

Dr. Fell drew in a deep breath, and prepared to get up.

'Mrs. Walker saw, with a rather horrible shock of realization, that she had been mistaken about the woman at the infirmary - and she guessed other things too. She saw the only other young woman hereabouts who is tall, as Rose Lestrangle was. She saw the only young woman with the same kind of figure as Rose Lestrangle. She saw a woman whose short fair hair was then covered by a dark silk scarf, hanging down at the back and resembling dark hair. She saw that woman holding out a key, as though to unlock the door of the infirmary.'

Dr. Fell rose to his feet. His face had lost most of its colour. Again his voice rang against the dark - panelled walls and the quiet staircase.

'She saw the daughter of my old friend, whom I have been trying to protect. She saw the murderer. She saw Caroline Kent.'

20

CAROLINE KENT.

Horror had got into Mark's bones, and wouldn't leave him.

'Understand me!' said Dr. Fell, roaring it out to conceal his distress. 'If we are to avert a tragedy far worse than the first, we must understand this girl - this woman, I mean - - as she really is. I have not known Sam Kent for so many years

without hearing a great deal about his family too.

'Caroline has a literal mind, of no great depth or imagination. But she feels, and feels deeply. You think her practical, as she thinks herself, because she deals with grocers and butchers and train - times. And yet she is the very reverse of that.

'How could she be practical? She has a father to whom his children are a mystery, and a mother (we have all known such well - meaning, disastrous females) who has "protected" her to the edge of a nervous breakdown. There is trouble if she drives a motor - car. There is trouble if she speaks an adult word, or strays more than a hundred yards off college property.

'She has been too much repressed, too much stifled. Even her fiance, whom she deeply loves, is the sort of strait - laced Puritan she thinks she ought to be - and can't be! Caroline Kent is twenty - seven. Go on treating such a woman as a child, and you must not be surprised if she behaves like one.

'In short, she was pitifully easy game for Frank Chadwick and Rose LeStrange.

'There is no evidence, nor can there ever be, that the good Rose deliberately threw her into Chadwick's arms and encouraged her in the hope of a major scandal. But there is no other way of interpreting Rose's actions. Rose gleefully let everyone think she was the woman concerned in those secret, conscience - haunted meetings at the infirmary. She even provided a false explanation, concerning amours against a "strange or unusual background", when she was accused of it.

'Caroline met Chadwick, at the infirmary, of course, because she dared go nowhere else. We can't tell how long the affair went on before gossip spread, the buzz began, and Rose LeStrange opened her campaign to terrify Caroline with hints of exposing her conduct. . . .'

'Wait!' interrupted Mark. 'This was before the night of the

murder?'

'Oh, long before. It must have been so, or it would have given no relish to Rose's pleasure in tormenting a victim. Surely you must have observed something of this? And seen it for yourself? Especially considering what was said and done at your own house on Saturday night?'

'I observed, yes. I didn't see. But I remember now - - ' Mark stopped.

'On that occasion, you may recall, Caroline Kent received three shocks, each worse than the one that had gone before. Eight days before then she had begun, at the gymnasium, a frantic attempt to show that a "murderer" was loose. . . .'

Again Mark interrupted.

'But what made Caroline, of all people, do a thing like that?' he asked. 'Who or what gave her the idea?'

'You did,' said Dr. Fell.

The ticking of the clock seemed to beat inside Mark's head.

'I beg your pardon!' Dr. Fell, overcoming distress, cleared his throat and spoke sharply. 'I should have phrased it better and said, "All of you did". Her father! Her fiance! Judith Walker! Yourself! All of you who so interminably discussed murder mysteries in fiction; and, inevitably, all the best ways of diverting suspicion.

'This is always going on in colleges; and I certainly have no objection to the noblest form of relaxation from academic work. But the wrong person heard it; and, all unaided, conceived the notion of burying one set of misdeeds under another set of "harmless" misdeeds.

'Caroline, as she told you herself, had no patience with subtleties. Her plot would be straightforward and schoolboy - ish. She was born and brought up here; Queen's College has

been her home and in a sense her playground. Her materials were luminous paint, remembered from a Christmas party; a drawing of the Founder's statue, to her a symbol since childhood. She had no idea she would frighten old George Johnson so much. She, the athletic and unimaginative, never dreamed young Hubert couldn't swim.

'And then, in your living - room on Saturday night. . . .

'Well, by your own account, recall what happened!

'Sam Kent was requested by the Master to investigate these disturbances. He believed they were genuine attempts at murder, as his daughter wished him to believe. Whereupon, in your house, Toby Saunders for the first time explained his own theory.

'These were not attempted murders, he declared, but the work of a "joker" who must be infinitely cruel as well as a little insane, and had been doing all this for a reason which, must be discovered. She protested: she was taken off balance; she suddenly realized, with horror, what her conduct must look like.

'That was nothing, however, compared to the shock which followed. Your wife contributed a demoralizing suggestion about the joker. "Why do you keep saying 'he'? Couldn't it just as well have been a woman?"

'And for no apparent reason, at that point, Caroline Kent went as pale as a ghost and commenced violently to protest.

'What occurred afterwards rolled on from worse to the very worst. Toby Saunders, with no idea that his cherished fiancée was anything but the rather prudish young lady she pretended to be, pitched on Rose Lestrangle as the joker of the gymnasium.

'It was not improved by matters between yourself and your wife. I spare you more mention of these; but, by thunder, I can hardly forget the result of that little scene. In a parked car,

outside the bungalow, Toby Saunders accused Rose of being the joker - and he did it when Caroline Kent was present.'

Dr. Fell moved slowly over and stood with his back to the fireplace. He breathed heavily for a moment before he continued.

Only too well Mark knew how intense Caroline could be, under that stolid - seeming exterior. Only too clearly he could remember her sitting on the sofa with Toby. 'You, Toby! Only you!' It had touched him at the time. Now - -

Another scene, which he had even forgotten to tell Dr. Fell, flashed through his mind as well. Rose Lestrangle had been torturing Caroline neatly on Saturday night.

He remembered Rose as he handed her the copy of Annandale, while she stood with her back to the open front door. Brenda and Toby had been in the hall, while Caroline waited outside. Taking the book, Rose had carefully looked over her right shoulder out of the doorway towards Caroline, and raised her voice.

'I love the Victorians,' Mark could hear Rose's phantom voice saying. 'They lived such morbidly strait - laced lives in public, didn't they?'

That was the voice heard by the terrified Caroline just before she and Toby had driven Rose to the Red Cottage on Saturday night.

It was as though Dr. Fell, now standing in front of the fireplace, had caught his thought without being aware of it.

'Up to this time.' Dr. Fell declared, 'Rose Lestrangle had been enjoying herself to the full. She knew what had been happening at the gymnasium as well as at the infirmary. She must have taken every chance to use sharp steel, figuratively speaking, on her victim. She had no intention of betraying Caroline just yet.

'And then - Toby Saunders accused her of being the joker.

'We need not wonder the amiable Rose was stupefied, bereft of speech. We need not wonder she could only glare and use those words: "Tomorrow morning. Dr. Saunders, you will hear of something."

'As you and I agreed last night, it was a deadly threat.

'Who alone, besides Saunders himself, heard that threat? Only Caroline Kent. To whom else could it have meant so much? Within an hour Rose Lestrangle was silenced for ever, by a woman driven past all endurance. As though that were not clear enough indication, Caroline afterwards blurted out words that gave the whole game away to Judith Walker.'

'To Judith Walker? When?'

'Early on Sunday morning. You were there. Sam Kent telephoned his house to explain his absence, but said no word of any death or murder. Caroline, if you recall, came racing to the bungalow in Sam's car.

'Mrs. Walker greeted her only with the statement of what she herself had heard: Rose was dead, stabbed with a knife from the bungalow. Caroline, in too overwrought a state, cried back, "Dead? Lying back in the chair? With what knife?"

'No mention whatever had been made of a chair. Indeed, Mrs. Walker immediately said so. At that time, of course, all the innocent people believed Rose Lestrangle had been stabbed at the dressing - table, seated on a stool which could never have been described like that.

'Only two persons, in our analysis, could have known the victim was stabbed in the easy - chair across the room: Toby Saunders, who locked up the room after moving the body; and the actual murderer, who left the victim there.'

Mark rubbed a hand across his forehead.

'Judith's a very clever woman, I admit. All the same, if she put two and two together at the time - -'

'No, no, no!' corrected Dr. Fell. 'She did not, as she confirmed to me this afternoon. She was too upset; and she had seen your wife go up the path to the bungalow; she was too obsessed with that particular memory.'

'On the other hand, she was there at the cottage most of the day, being questioned by the police. She heard all the evidence. How could a "chair" figure in the matter? She began to put two and two together only after the shock of realizing that the woman she had seen entering the infirmary was not Rose, but Caroline; that Caroline had made more than a slip. It added to the shock of recognition which made Mrs. Walker collapse in the library on Sunday night.'

'My own mental state all day Monday or yesterday, when I arrived here, I confess to have been almost as bad as hers. Consider the grisly prospect. Sam Kent had summoned me. From the very long account he gave me in those phone - calls to New York, it seemed to me at least possible that his own daughter might be the joker of the gymnasium and perhaps the murderer as well.'

'Yet Sam himself never suspected this in his wildest dreams. Shrewd as he could be in determining Rose Lestrangle's character, clearly as he read her and did not want the truth disclosed because that woman was paid off justly for her pleasure in torture, he never thought the victim of the torture could be his own daughter.'

'It is not uncommon among fathers, to be sure. But it made my position no more comfortable. Every word, every piece of testimony, indicated that Caroline had been behind everything. And still Sam insisted on learning the truth, even if he did not publicly reveal it.'

'Archons of Athens!

'If at times I appeared stricken, or even more half - witted than is my wont, you will understand the reason. My worst moments occurred at the bungalow, in the evening. Sam told you all about Rose's true nature, and pointed out that Rose had been killed by someone she had been spiritually blackmailing.

'When he carried you off to the drawing - room at the cottage, to show you the framed cartoons, I could not help uttering the word, "Blind!" in a way that at least came from the heart.

'It was not the worst moment. Shortly afterwards (as I have already made clear) you and Sam began a discussion about the woman at the infirmary. You announced in ringing tones that Rose would not have visited the infirmary with Chadwick; Sam, in turn, said that we should discover the truth if we learned the reason for those secret visits to the infirmary.

'I could not help groaning out a Scriptural expletive, and resolving that the evidence against Caroline Kent must somehow be ditched or destroyed.

'But how? Toby Saunders had been sincerely shouting that Rose herself was the joker. Could Caroline have taken advantage of this? She must have returned to the bungalow on foot, from her own home, at about a quarter to midnight. Her father, Toby Saunders, and Dr. Hewitt were assembled together arguing the case; she had ample opportunity to slip away unseen.

'Could she, for instance, have brought the bottle of luminous paint to the bungalow? Could she have pressed the dead woman's finger - prints round it, and hidden it there? The police had made a thorough search, true. On the other hand, Rose had called out to her - calling her "darling", after the casual fashion of any woman to another - and asked her to get a book - mark from the desk.

'Could the luminous paint, anything of the sort, have been hidden in that Chippendale writing - desk? In a secret

compartment, perhaps?

'Well, it was not. A little reflection should have convinced me that such a melodramatic notion was nonsense. Caroline Kent, driven mad by her tormentor, committed murder. But she would never have tried to blame someone else for something she did. Her only concern, if you will recall her plight in the library on Sunday night, was that Toby Saunders must never learn of this. Isn't that true?'

Mark, who had been picturing each move and detail as Dr. Fell mentioned it, nodded.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'In the library Caroline nearly broke down. She wanted it to be a suicide verdict. I can still hear her crying out, "If you go on saying this is murder, you'll only bring a most awful thing on someone I'm very fond of." She meant Toby must never know. But you couldn't find any false evidence to use in her favour?'

'None.'

'Or work out any way of protecting her?'

'None. Also, Judith Walker knew she was guilty.'

'But Judith wouldn't have given Caroline away! Now I understand what Judith, partly in a drug - fog and partly out of it, was talking about last night.'

'Mrs. Walker told me this afternoon,' Dr. Fell grunted, 'that she had babbled a great deal of ways in which one could procure luminous paint, and get a copy of a key to the infirmary.'

'Yes! She was talking about Caroline! I never realized at the time; I spoke out pretty sharply, and she recovered enough to say she meant Rose LeStrange. She didn't mean Rose LeStrange at all! Then, when she knew I had discovered the secret of the locked room - -'

'My dear sir,' interrupted Dr. Fell, 'Mrs. Walker does not know

the secret of the locked room!'

'No; but she saw I had discovered the secret. And, when she knew that, she said . . .'

Judith Walker's voice rang clearly from the direction of the staircase.

'Shall I tell you what I said?' asked Judith.

Mark whirled round. Dr. Fell lifted his eyes.

Judith was standing half way down the stairs, her dark dress throwing her face and eyes into strong prominence against the lamplight.

'No,' she said huskily. 'I didn't go to Richmond. I couldn't. I think Dr. Fell knew I was here all the time.'

'You've heard - -?' Mark began.

'Yes,' answered Judith. 'I've heard it all. You promised to telephone me. Mark; but I knew you wouldn't remember.' She made a short, slight gesture. 'Yes! I'll tell you what I said last night. I said you mustn't carry this any further. I said you didn't understand what a woman might do when she's obsessed by any man, not even a particular man.'

She walked carefully down the rest of the steps. Then Judith threw back her head, so that the hair flamed.

'Oh, yes! I was speaking of Caroline. But I might have been speaking of myself.' Again Judith made the short, slight gesture.

'That doesn't matter,' she went on in a rush. 'What does matter is a question of plain justice. If Caroline killed that appalling woman, she only did what any human being would have done and ought to have done. Dr. Fell, may I ask you a question?'

'You may,' said Dr. Fell.

'In order to protect Brenda Ruthven, who isn't guilty, you were forced to tell the police who is guilty? And the police are going to arrest Caroline?'

'Oh, no,' said Dr. Fell. 'I was beaten, Mrs. Walker. But I was not beaten quite so badly as all that.'

There was a silence as sudden as the stroke of a gong.

'They're not going to arrest her?' Judith cried.

'I might draw your attention,' Dr. Fell said politely, 'to a number of points. First: a full - scale police investigation, without kid - glove tactics, would soon disclose what Caroline Kent did whether I revealed it or not. Second: even in the doubtful event that there is enough evidence to indict her for murder, it is a thousand to one against the chance of any jury ever convicting her. Third: if they convicted her, they would also have to convict Toby Saunders as accessory after the fact. And, since the chances are astronomical in this state against the conviction of a man because he guards and shields his fiancée . . .'

'But Toby wasn't shielding his fiancée! ' said Mark. ' That's just it. He thought he was shielding Brenda!'

'Sir, I am aware of that. So are Mr. Henderson and the authorities behind him, though they choose not to credit it. In short, they don't want to prosecute. And when your obedient servant, flabbergasted, asked why this should be so . . .'

'Yes!'

'I received what, in this present age, is the most astonishing reply of all. They believe in justice.'

'Then Caroline and Toby, both of them, have a chance for some kind of life together?'

'Sir, am I an oracle or an augur? How can I tell? If he really loves her, it is quite possible. But, before that can happen, two

things must be accomplished first. We must make sure Chadwick does not talk - -'

'Chadwick!' breathed Mark. 'I forgot him.'

'Believe me, I had not,' Dr. Fell retorted grimly. 'I did not want Saunders to meet him, as you observed. But now I am wondering where he has got to. He should have been here long ago.'

'How much does Chadwick know?'

'Not much, I hope. That is what I must discover. Finally, Caroline Kent must tell Toby Saunders everything.'

It was Judith who cried out in protest.

'But she'll never do that! A minute ago you said it yourself: Caroline was most concerned to keep it all from Toby. She'll never tell him.'

'Nevertheless, she must do so. I say again,' roared Dr. Fell, 'it is their only chance. If she does not explain about the affair with Chadwick; if she does not make him understand it was only a momentary brainstorm - -'

Dr. Fell stopped, raising his head.

Outside the doorway the red light had darkened, glowing lurid and unearthly beyond tree - tops. Brenda Ruthven, trembling so much she all but fell, ran up the path and opened the screen door. Brenda looked at Mark and then quickly away.

'Caroline?' Brenda blurted out. 'She has told Toby.'

The screen door banged behind her. It was a moment more before Brenda controlled her breathing.

'Toby,' she said, 'came straight over to my house from here. Then Caroline arrived. She - she wasn't herself. She seemed to think I had seen her at the bungalow. I hadn't! I never even

dreamed it was Caroline who . . . who ... did what was done that night.

'I went inside the bungalow; I admit I did. But I never saw her or heard anything except what I've told you. Mark, you've got to believe me. Then Caroline told Toby: about Frank, about everything. I never saw anything like Toby's face. It was . . .I don't know! . . . grey.'

'But what did Toby say? ' asked Mark, feeling a little sick.

'Does he hold it against her as much as all that?'

'Against her?' said Brenda. 'Oh, no! He doesn't hold it against her.'

This was the point at which Brenda caught sight of Judith; both of them flinched.

'But what are you all doing here?' Brenda cried. 'What is it? What's happening?'

Dr. Fell's massive and imperious gesture silenced them all.

'Mrs. Ruthven, we are waiting for Frank Chadwick. He must cause no trouble for anyone. Let me repeat that I don't think he knows much. I suspect he has been in Queenshaven twice to see Caroline Kent, and make sure the intrigue was hushed up for fear of his father; but he did not dare to go to her house. In that event, there should be little difficulty in ensuring his silence about - -'

'Frank Chadwick?' Brenda almost screamed. 'But he's here, isn't he?'

'Here?' repeated Dr. Fell, taken aback.

'Yes! His car's outside in the lane. He must have got here some time ago!'

Outside the doorway, somebody laughed.

It was clear, rich, ringing laughter, from an assured young man who always gets his own way in this world. Chadwick himself, in a grey flannel suit of impeccable cut, sauntered in and surveyed them in his cool way.

'You're right, my dear,' he said to Brenda, who shrank away. 'I've been here for quite a time. And the old codger, whoever he is, is wrong. There's not much I don't know now.'

Coolly, master of the situation, he closed the heavy old tavern - door behind him. Echoes of the eighteenth century were in the air as the door closed.

'And might I ask,' said Dr. Fell, speaking with difficulty, 'what you propose to do?'

'Oh, you might ask,' Chadwick told him agreeably, showing the wide - spaced upper teeth. 'And I might or might not answer, just as I pleased. In this case, though, it's better to tell you. Caroline Kent is going up for trial. Murder.'

'But the police - -'

'Don't try to bluff, old codger,' Frank interrupted, with a gentle but fishily derisive shake of the head. 'They may not want to arrest her. But my father has a lot of influence; they'll have to. If she's fool enough to fall for my line, and then get stupider still and kill somebody . . . well! She'll just have to take her medicine, won't she?'

'Young man, do you hate Caroline Kent as much as all that?'

'Hate her, Pop?' repeated Frank, genuinely surprised. His charm radiated and beamed in the old room. 'You mustn't get me wrong, you know. I don't hate her at all. She's a silly wench, and too easy to get around; I feel kind of sorry for her.'

'Then why are you doing this?'

'Ask Ruthven,' Frank suggested.

Still agreeably, he glanced first at Mark and then at Brenda.

'You know, Ruthven,' he said, 'I've got a little score to settle with you and our dear Brenda too. People don't annoy me and get away with it.'

'You flatter yourself,' said Mark.

'Don't talk big, Ruthven. It never pays with me. A lot of mud is going to get thrown when Caroline goes up for trial. If a good deal of it gets spattered on you and Brenda, and dear old Queen's College too, I'm afraid you'll just have to take it. I can tell a lot as a witness. And what are you going to do about it?'

'I'll show you.'

Frank's right hand flashed to his hip - pocket.

'Don't try it,' he advised. He was still smiling, but his eyes were as blankly cruel as a cat's, and he meant business. 'I've got something in my pocket here. And there are witnesses here to say you attacked me if I have to use it. You don't like bullets: do you, Ruthven?'

'I - -'

'No, I thought you wouldn't.' Frank's smile both pardoned and jeered. 'So all of you had better be good. Don't tell me what my father will do to me, either. I know he will. But this is worth it; and he'll forgive me in the end. People always forgive me. Thanks. That's all I've got to say.'

His cool gaze wandered over them. He bowed slightly, pleasantly. He opened the heavy door, pushed open the screen - door with his elbow, and turned round as he stepped out into the brick path.

There he stopped abruptly and stood still. Something like a gasp whistled up inside his throat.

Just twenty paces away, facing him at the duellist's distance,

stood Toby Saunders.

The faint red light, still wild and unearthly in the west, outlined both men. But it did not show Toby's face, which was just as well.

In his right hand Toby weighed the murderous Webley - 45. In his left hand, swinging it by the trigger - guard, was the other - 45 revolver. Toby walked slowly forward, shortening the distance from twenty paces to twenty feet.

While Frank stood motionless, paralysed, like others who were watching from the door, Toby carefully inspected both revolvers. He broke open the magazine of each, to make sure they were fully loaded. He closed each magazine with a snap, weighed the revolvers, and threw one of them.

He threw it like a horseshoe. The dark steel glimmered in red - lit air before it clattered on the bricks a few feet in front of Frank Chadwick, and slid to Frank's feet.

Then Toby spoke at last.

'Pick it up,' he said.

'I -'

'Pick it up.' Toby said.

His own revolver he dropped at his own feet in the path, the same distance from him. He watched Frank. He waited.

Mark Ruthven couldn't move. He wanted to move, to throw Brenda and Judith from the line of fire. But the clock - tick beat in his ears, the vision of a sword - duel two hundred years ago was vivid in that tavern; and so he waited too - until Frank made a move of blinding swiftness.

With his left hand, Frank reached down towards the pistol, slowly. But his right hand darted to his hip pocket. He swung up a - 38 Colt automatic. And he fired four shots at Toby's

face. He had seen too many films where killing like this is shown as easy. The automatic threw the bullets high and wild, and then jammed; its reports exploded with stunning concussion in the evening air, driving a scream and swirl of birds from the trees. But Toby stood there, unmoving and unhit. His teeth gleamed as he smiled.

Toby, who could put a bullet through a dime at less than that distance, bent down and scooped up his own revolver.

Frank tried to fire again, and failed. Nor could he move. He could only scream. He was screaming when Toby drew a careful bead on the centre of his forehead, and squeezed the trigger.

There was no report. Toby, so startled he could not believe his ears, stared at the revolver in his hand. With ammunition unused since 1917, he had not reckoned that there might be duds among the cartridges.

Frank had heard nothing either. He lay face up in the brick path, sprawled, his countenance sunken and bluish, in the shock of a dead faint. 'No!' shouted a voice behind Toby, as Toby lifted the revolver again. The police - car had prowled up into the lane behind Frank's Cadillac and Toby's Chevrolet. Mark had never heard the voice of Lieutenant Walter Henderson, but he rightly guessed the identity of the tall man who climbed out of the car.

'You don't need to. Dr. Saunders,' Lieutenant Henderson said. 'If you're afraid that young rat will tell anything, he won't now.'

Toby found his voice. 'Look, Lieutenant! This fight - -'

'What fight?' asked the other blandly. 'I didn't see anything.' He glanced down the path and called out. 'Did you people see anything?'

'No!' thundered Dr. Fell.

'I didn't think you had.' Lieutenant Henderson nodded, and turned back once more before he got into the car. 'By the way, do you believe me now?'

'Yes!' roared Dr. Fell.

'I hoped you would,' said Lieutenant Henderson, as he climbed into the car. 'We're a peculiar lot here. We believe in justice.'